Brief Affairs

Narrative Strategies in Female Adultery Stories by Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton

Els van der Werf

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Narrative Strategies in Female Adultery Stories by Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton

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Preface

The writing of this thesis was not a brief affair. When I first started thinking about doing a PhD, in the autumn of 1997, I only knew that, for years, I had been fascinated by the nineteenth-century novel of female adultery and that I admired the work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton. What followed was a long journey of discovery, during which I became acquainted with a wealth of literature from a wide variety of countries about women who, in an adulterous affair, try to find the excitement and happiness that their marriages do not offer them. A large amount of critical study on the subject of adultery in literature had already been done. What could I hope to contribute to this? Peter von Matt, in his book *Liebesverrrat: Die Treulosen in der Literatur* [*Betrayal of Love: The Unfaithful in Literature*], issues a warning to those who aspire to get to the bottom of this literary topic.

> Wer sich an die Aufgabe macht, die Treulosen in der Literatur zu untersuchen, dem Liebesverrat in alten und neuen Geschichten nachzuspüren, tut gut daran, von Anfang an klarzustellen, daβ er diesem Vorhaben nicht gewachsen ist. So erspart er den Leserinnen und Lesern eine Enttäuschung, die unausweichlich eintreten würde, hätte er die Erwartung zugelassen, hier würde nun am Beispiel der Literatur durchsichtig gemacht, welche Kräfte hinter dem allgemeinen Unglück jener Menschen wirksam sind, die auf den Willen, unbedingt glücklich zu sein, noch nicht verzichtet haben.[1]
>
> [Whoever takes up the task of investigating the unfaithful in literature, of tracing infidelity as told in old and new stories, does well to confess, right from the start, that he is not up to the task. In this way he saves the readers a disappointment, which would have been inevitable if he had allowed them to expect that the examples taken from literature would make transparent which forces cause the general unhappiness of those who have not yet given up the determination to be happy at all cost.]

A sobering thought! Von Matt's book is one of several comprehensive studies of the representation of infidelity in literature as a reflection of human psychology and social structures. He takes an all-encompassing view of adulterous and

[1] Peter von Matt, *Liebesverrrat: Die Treulosen in der Literatur* (1989; München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004) 17. The translation is my own.

betrayed wives and unfaithful and cuckolded husbands. My approach, I felt, would have to be less panoptic.

I discovered that, apart from the many turn-of-the-century novels on female adultery, there were also many short stories from that period about women who succumb to their adulterous desires. I moreover realized that Edith Wharton was an important contributor to this type of short story, as was her contemporary Kate Chopin, whose novel *The Awakening* had already come to be recognized as the most striking American contribution to literature on a topic which was predominantly associated with European, particularly French, novels. The combination appeared to be very promising: I was convinced that I had found my research niche.

The limited time that I had available to work on my research meant that I only gradually determined what my leading hypotheses were and that finding satisfactory answers to my questions was a slow process, which nevertheless continued to yield fascinating insights. I have often been both pleasantly surprised and quietly amused by what I found in books, libraries and on that invaluable source of information that is available to researchers nowadays: the internet. I confess that I developed a rather curious habit in dealing with new sources of information. Whenever I picked up a book, for example, which I had not consulted before, I would start by checking the index for the entry 'adultery,' and if that was not listed, I would look for a synonym, like 'illicit love.' My heart would always make a small leap when I actually found such an entry, for it held the promise of an interesting reference to a female adultery novel or short story that I did not know yet, or a new analytical approach, or new insights into the application of the motif.

One day I came across a hefty book entitled *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*.[2] The title was very promising, in view of my interest in Chopin and Wharton. The index listed 'adultery,' referring to pages 646-648. Full of anticipation I turned to the pages indicated, only to find that I had been referred to an entry entitled 'The other woman'! To my surprise, the interpretation of the term adultery was linked only to works of fiction about adulterous husbands and their wives' response to the intrusion into their marriages by another woman. The entry also listed several short stories by American women writers on this topic.[3] Kate Chopin had her own entry, which discussed *The Awakening*, referring to it as a celebration of women's sexual awakening and emphasizing its wider theme, that of the search for woman's true self. In the entry on Edith Wharton, her adulterous affair with Morton Fullerton was discussed, under the heading 'Romantic Love,' but no mention was made of her recurrent use of adultery in her fiction. What was I to make of this? Was it just an unfortunate oversight on the part of the editors (all women!) not to acknowledge a long tradition of literary writing on female adultery and the contribution of American women writers to this

[2] *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. in chief Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (New York, [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] A number of these short stories were collected in: Susan Koppelman, ed., *The Other Woman: Stories of Two Women and a Man* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1984).

tradition? Had they, if only unconsciously, joined the nineteenth-century 'conspiracy of silence,' which discouraged any public mentioning of women's adulterous desires and transgressive affairs? Or did this omission signal a gendered approach to women's literature, which sought to de-emphasize the role of women as the transgressor in an adulterous affair? It seemed, at any rate, to underline the generally accepted assumption that female adultery was, for a variety of reasons, not a topic which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American writers were expected to address.

With this study, I hope to contribute to the reader's insight into the representation of female adultery in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and into the way in which the short story form influenced the employment of this motif. Chopin's and Wharton's repeated use of the topic, despite its controversial status, strongly informed my reading of their female adultery stories and led me to hypothesize that it formed an important aspect of their authorial self-construction. I hope that this study nuances the interpretation of the lives and letters of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton. And last, but certainly not least, I hope that it will whet the reader's appetite for all those novels and short stories about 'naughty' women that I have had so much fun reading and rereading.

Projects like these are highly solitary undertakings. Since I expected to progress slowly, I kept relatively quiet about it until I became confident that I would finish it. Many thanks to everybody who knew what I was spending so much of my time on, but thankfully did not ask how the work was progressing every time I ran into them.

Special words of thanks to my supervisors, prof. dr. Helen Wilcox (University of Groningen and University of Bangor) and prof. dr. Liesbeth Korthals Altes (University of Groningen), who inspired and encouraged me throughout and whose critical comments have been of immense value. I would also like to thank the members of the examination board, prof. dr. Wara Wende (University of Groningen), prof. dr. Hans Bak (Radboud University Nijmegen), and prof. dr. Bill Overton (Loughborough University), for their comments on the manuscript.

I am grateful for the moral and practical support from the 'Promovendi en Postdoc Centrum' of the University of Groningen and my fellow researchers in the centre. I would also like to thank my employer, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, for their recognition of the importance of this project for me as a person and as an employee and for facilitating me in the final phase of the project.

Finally I would like to thank my family and friends, in particular my 'paranymphs,' Lia Dekker and Else Janssen.

Notes on the text

Spelling and punctuation

I have used British English spelling in this thesis. However, since many of my citations were taken from sources, primary and secondary, which were written in American English, this has resulted in a seemingly inconsistent spelling pattern. I have accepted this as unfortunate, but inevitable.

I have used double apostrophes for quotations and single apostrophes to indicate that a word or phrase has been used in a special meaning and to indicate a quotation within a quotation.

List of abbreviations

A	Edith Wharton, "Atrophy"
AT	Edith Wharton, "Autres Temps..."
BG	Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*
BP	Edith Wharton, the "Beatrice Palmato fragment"
CB	Kate Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball"
CSS	*The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, 2 vols., ed. R.W.B. Lewis
CW	*The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted
DH	Edith Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*
DP	Edith Wharton, "The Duchess at Prayer"
DT	Louisa May Alcott, "A Double Tragedy: An Actor's Story"
FF	Louisa May Alcott, "Fatal Follies"
FL-I	Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, First Series
FL-II	Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, Second Series
FL-III	Fanny Fern, *Fresh Leaves*
FWM	Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*
GAN	Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel"
HFS	Edith Wharton, "His Father's Son"
HL	Kate Chopin, "Her Letters"
IEF	Edith Wharton, Introduction to *Ethan Frome*
JH	Edith Wharton, "Joy in the House"
K	Edith Wharton, "Kerfol"
KCC	*The Kate Chopin Companion,* Thomas Bonner, Jr.

KCPP	*Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, eds. Emily Toth and Per Seyersted
LA	Edith Wharton, "The Life Apart (*L'âme close*)"
LBSJ	Kate Chopin, "A Lady of Bayou St. John"
LEW	*The Letters of Edith Wharton*, eds. R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis
LR	Edith Wharton, "The Long Run"
LRR	Edith Wharton, "The Line of Least Resistance"
LW	Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*
MCD	Kate Chopin, "Madame Célestin's Divorce"
MFF	Edith Wharton, *A Motor-Flight Through France*
MT	Edith Wharton, "The Muse's Tragedy"
P	Edith Wharton, "The Pretext"
PG	Edith Wharton, Preface to *Ghosts*
PPP	Louisa May Alcott, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment"
PW	Edith Wharton, "Permanent Wave"
RW	Kate Chopin, "A Respectable Woman"
S	Kate Chopin, "The Storm"
SB	Edith Wharton, "Souls Belated"
TK	Kate Chopin, "The Kiss"
WF	Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*

Contents

Introduction

In his well-known study *L'Amour et l'Occident*, the French critic Denis de Rougemont challenges his readers with a sweeping rhetorical question: "Sans l'adultère, que seraient toutes nos littératures?" [What would our literature be without adultery?].[1] He argues: "Pour qui nous jugerait sur nos littératures, l'adultère paraîtrait l'une des occupations les plus remarquables auxqelles se livrent les Occidentaux" (Rougemont, 3) [If we were to be judged by our literature, adultery would seem to be one of the most remarkable occupations to which people of the Western world surrender themselves]. Rougemont finds this literary fascination with adultery hardly surprising. In his analysis of 'love in the Western world,' he argues that the uncontrollable desire for passionate love has always been closely related to unhappiness and suffering and that it is therefore inevitable that it forms the main subject of much of our literature. After all, Rougemont disputes, "l'amour heureux n'a pas d'histoire" (Rougemont, 2) [there is no story in happy love], and adultery is nearly always at the heart of the matter, for "la moitié du malheur humain se résume dans le mot d'adultère" (Rougemont, 4) [half of human unhappiness can be summarized in the word adultery].

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy had already come to a similar conclusion, when he wrote that "[a]dultery is not only the favourite, but almost the only theme of all novels."[2] Although writers have also been interested in the literary use of the adulterous affairs of married men, in novels from the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century, it is more specifically female adultery, the transgressive love of a married woman, which is a frequently introduced topic – so frequently, in fact, that it has been widely acknowledged as a literary phenomenon and has been examined and discussed by a number of literary critics.[3] Bill Overton maintains

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[1] Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'Occident* (Paris: Plon, 1939) 3. De Rougemont's study was published in an English translation under the title *Love in the Western World*. The translations in this thesis, however, are my own.

[2] Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art? and Essays on Art by Tolstoy*, trans. by Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1930) 154. The essay, which first appeared in 1898, is cited in Bill Overton, *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830-1900* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 1.

[3] The most important studies on the theme of (female) adultery in literature are (in order of publication): Judith Armstrong, *The Novel of Adultery* (London, [etc.]: Macmillan, 1976); Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore, MD, [etc.]: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Biruté Ciplijauskaité, *La Mujer Insatisfecha: El Adulterio en la Novela Realista* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1984); Bettina Klingler, *Emma Bovary und ihre Schwester. Die unverstandene Frau: Variationen eines literarischen Typus von Balzac bis Thomas Mann* (Rheinbach-Merzbach: CMZ-Verlag, 1986); Peter von Matt, *Liebesverrat: Die Treulosen in der Literatur* (1989; München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004); Alison Sinclair, *The Deceived*

that the "leading features of novels of this type are strikingly similar. With minor variations, each is based on a plot in which a married woman from the middle or upper classes is seduced by an unmarried man and comes to grief" (Overton 1996, vi). In the most famous examples of this type of novel, such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the story of the adulterous wife is told with a comprehensiveness and insight into the characters involved that has not been surpassed since. The adulterous liaison is pivotal to the novel of female adultery, which distinguishes it from the many novels in which female adultery occurs only at the fringes of the plot, from novels which deal with the (unconsummated) adulterous desire of the married woman, and from novels in which the adulterous affair is averted (Overton 2002, 4-7).[4]

Although generally associated with the novel, female adultery is equally well represented in short stories of the period. In collecting examples from various literary traditions, I have used a considerably looser definition than Bill Overton has proposed in theorizing the novel of female adultery. In my survey of this surprisingly large corpus of literature, I include short stories which focus on the transgressive act itself or on its immediate consequences. I also include stories in which the adultery does not actually take place, but which focus on the adulterous desire of the married woman and/or the suspicion of her adultery. My widening of the definition is, in my opinion, justified, because the introduction in turn-of-the-century literature of a married woman's adultery, whether real or imagined, is usually not an end in itself, but a literary tool to give expression to a wider variety of views. I therefore prefer to speak about female adultery as a 'motif,' rather than a 'theme,' as it is more commonly referred to in literary criticism.[5]

Husband: A Kleinian Approach to the Literature of Infidelity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Bill Overton, *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830-1900* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Nicholas White and Naomi Segal, eds., *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Annik Houel, *L'Adultère au Féminin et son Roman* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1999); Cristina Naupert, *La Tematología Comparatista: entre Teoría y Práctica: La Novela de Adulterio en la Segunda Mitad del Siglo XIX* (Madrid : Arco/Libros, 2001); Bill Overton, *Fictions of Female Adultery, 1684-1890: Theories and Circumtexts* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Maria R. Rippon, *Judgment and Justification in the Nineteenth-Century Novel of Adultery* (Westport, CT, [etc.]: Greenwood Press, 2002); Elizabeth Amann, *Importing Madame Bovary: The Politics of Adultery* (New York, [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[4] In his second book on the novel of female adultery, *Fictions of Female Adultery, 1686-1890: Theories and Circumtexts*, Overton argues that he has come to prefer the term wifely adultery, instead of female adultery, because "'the great majority of novels of adultery deal with single adultery on the part of the female' – 'single' referring to adultery in which only one of the partners is married. For this reason, as I should have realized at the time, a more precise term is 'novel of wifely adultery'" (Overton 2002, vii). Although I do not disagree with Overton's arguments for refining the terminology, I prefer the term female adultery, because it is the more widely used in literary criticism and elsewhere.

[5] The terms 'motif' and 'theme' are often used interchangeably. I use the term 'motif' in the sense of a salient, recurring feature in literature, which can be used to give expression to different moral, ethical, or ideological concerns. I understand the term 'theme' to refer to the moral, ethical, or ideological concerns which are incorporated in a work of literature. Thus a motif can be used to illustrate (aspects of) a theme.

The recurrent use of the female adultery motif in turn-of-the-century fiction signals a profound concern for social and moral issues related to the position of women in contemporary society, the role of marriage, the role of the woman in that marriage, the legal (im)possibilities of obtaining a divorce, and the controversial social status of the adulteress and/or divorcee. Fiction offered an opportunity for the exploration of a variety of views on a topic which was felt to be particularly relevant in the public debate on moral values that governed contemporary society. As such, literature was instrumental in what Stephen Greenblatt calls "the transmission of culture," in the sense of "[t]he ensemble of beliefs and practices" upon which social relations in a given society are based.[6] For, as many scholars have pointed out, literature can function as a platform for the expression of views and ideologies and at the same time provide an opportunity for readers to identify – even if only partly – with literary characters.[7] Readers are given the chance to view a given situation from the perspective of the narrator(s) and characters of a work of fiction and thus may gain understanding of how these fictional men and women undergo the events and occurrences that shape their fictional lives and how they respond to them, both emotionally and in terms of the actions they take.[8] Depending on their ideological position, writers used the female adultery motif in their work to express a variety of views, ranging from agreement with to opposition to the dominant social and moral views, and thus contributed to the development of and perhaps even the change of the culture in which they worked. I will argue that the writer's choice of narrative perspective and his/her use of techniques with regard to point of view are an important factor in the effectiveness of a work of fiction in creating such a platform for the negotiation of views.

The focus of this study will be on the use of the female adultery motif in short stories by two American women writers whose literary careers began at the end of the nineteenth century: Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton. This study will address a number of issues that have so far been dealt with only marginally in the critical literature on the female adultery motif in nineteenth-century literature. I will analyse the influence of the short story genre on the use of the motif and discuss both the limitations of the form and the possibilities which the genre offered in the expression of the writer's views. I will give a survey of the way in which nineteenth-century writers used the female adultery motif in their short stories, focusing on the contribution of

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[6] Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago, [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 225.

[7] Martha Nussbaum, for instance, argues that "literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life." Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, [etc]: Oxford University Press, 1990) 48.

[8] Jørgen Dines Johansen describes this process as "the mental experimentation on common experiences, attitudes, and emotional responses." *Literary Discourse: A Semiotic-Pragmatic Approach to Literature* (Toronto, [etc.]: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 297.

women writers and discussing how and why the application of the motif by women writers differed from the way in which their male colleagues employed it. Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton frequently used the female adultery motif throughout their literary careers to express their views on the position of women in turn-of-the-century American society and on the conflict between the social expectations of women and these women's personal dreams and ambitions. This is remarkable in view of the fact that the literary climate in which they worked did not look favourably upon the introduction of topics which challenged the existing morals and values of contemporary society. Literary critics and biographers have been eager to point out biographical facts in the lives of these authors which may have inspired them to write about female adultery. This study, however, will focus on Chopin's and Wharton's professional and artistic reasons for their frequent use of the female adultery motif.

The persistence of both writers in introducing such a controversial literary motif, at a time when the market for which they worked was not receptive to its use, raises a number of pertinent questions. Why were Chopin and Wharton so interested in using the female adultery motif in their work? How did they succeed in circumventing the objections of their publishers against the use of such a controversial topic? What does their determination to express dissenting views with regard to the position of women in contemporary society reveal about their ideas about their authorship? I want to offer the following hypotheses. Firstly, Chopin and Wharton were inspired by and wanted to be seen as part of a European, rather than a domestic, tradition of fiction writing and therefore chose to distinguish themselves from other American women writers by introducing a literary motif that was primarily associated with Continental European, particularly French, literature. Secondly, in order to make their use of the female adultery motif acceptable for the literary establishment for which they wrote, Chopin and Wharton developed a number of narrative strategies involving, firstly, their choice of the short story genre and of certain subgenres of the short story, and, secondly, their techniques concerning point of view.[9] They opted for the short story as the more convenient genre for the introduction of the female adultery motif, and in addition exploited the characteristics of the regionalist short story, in the case of Chopin, and the ghost story, in Wharton's case. At a textual level, both writers employed techniques concerning point of view to enhance the

[9] There appears to be a lack of consensus about the use of literary terms like 'genre,' 'subgenre,' 'mode,' 'type,' and 'kind' to denote the various categories into which literature can be divided. For a discussion on this subject see, for example, Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), especially pp. 106-129. I have chosen to use the term 'genre' where I distinguish between the novel and the short story. I consider various types of short stories, such as sensational, Gothic, regionalist, satiric, and sentimental short stories, to be 'subgenres.' However, I will feel free to use the term 'genre' with reference to the subgenres which I discuss, when I expect there to be no confusion with the first meaning I give to the term. I feel justified in this perhaps somewhat general and broad use of the term 'genre,' because I think it will enhance the readability of this study. My primary aim is not to discuss literary typology, but to discuss Chopin's and Wharton's use of genres and subgenres in relation to the female adultery motif.

expression of their views with regard to the position of women. Thirdly, I want to hypothesize that the recurrent use of female adultery in their writing shows Chopin's and Wharton's determination to address issues which were potentially challenging accepted moral values of nineteenth-century American society. In doing so, they revealed their ambition to be recognized as literary artists who, in the expression of their views, contributed to, and thus influenced, the public debate on the position of women in contemporary society.

i. A European subject

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton started their careers in the wake of a large number of female writers who had begun to emerge on the American literary scene in the middle of the nineteenth century. In spite of the fact that, throughout the century, the American market continued to be flooded by fiction from Europe, and especially from England, there was, from the first decades of the nineteenth century onwards, an increasing interest in and demand for the work of American authors.

The role of American women writers in the development of the American novel writing tradition has been the subject of intensive study.[10] Nina Baym, analysing women's novels in America from between 1820 and 1870, argues that these novels "are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women. They chronicle the 'trials and triumph' [. . .] of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them" (Baym 1978, 22). This 'overplot,' as Baym calls it, forms the basis of novels which have been grouped together under the heading 'sentimental fiction,' 'fiction of sensibility,' and 'domestic fiction,' or 'domestic sentimentalism.' The women writers who produced these novels, such as Catharine Sedgwick, Susanna Warner, and E.D.E.N. Southworth, played an important role on the American literary market until after the Civil War, enjoying enormous popularity and sometimes earning substantial incomes from their writing. The success of these women writers caused Nathaniel Hawthorne to complain in 1855: "America is now wholly given over to a d–d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with

[10] My most important sources of information on these women writers are: Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to the Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978; Urbana, IL, [etc.]: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Susan K. Harris, *Nineteenth-century American Women's Novels: Interpretative Strategies* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984; Chapel Hill, NC, [etc.]: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991; Oxford, [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1994).

their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed."[11] Hawthorne's remark illustrates the generally unfavourable reception of women's fiction by male critics. In addition, these literary women tended not to see themselves as artists, but "conceptualized authorship as a profession rather than a calling, as work and not art" (Baym 1978, 32). It was not until after the 1870s, as the postbellum period saw a gradual change of the literary climate, that women writers began to claim their place as literary artists.

Susan Harris points out that the novels of American women writers of the second half of the nineteenth century "illustrate a genuinely radical change in women's attitudes toward themselves and their personal and political capabilities. By the mid-1870s, the passive, self-abnegating female of early didactic novels had been transformed into an active, self-possessed, and politically conscious woman" (Harris, 201). Not only did women writers in their fiction start to explore the changing role of women in nineteenth-century society, they wanted to be given recognition for their contribution to American literature. As Elizabeth Ammons argues: "[S]erious women writers at the turn into the twentieth century were determined to invade the territory of high art traditionally posted in western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men."[12] Rejecting the condescending epithet of 'scribbling women,' they wanted to be recognized as literary artists. Ammons lists seventeen women writers whom she sees as belonging to this group, including Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton (Ammons 1992, 3). Both writers started their careers as fiction writers in the late 1880s and, writing for the American market, they formed part of the literary tradition from which they emerged. Without wanting to dismiss their indebtedness to their American precursors or disregard their place in American literary history, I want to argue that neither Chopin nor Wharton associated themselves with the American tradition of women's writing, but instead sought to align themselves with the work of their European precursors and contemporaries. Their admiration for and professional interest in the work of their European colleagues was to an important extent based on the way in which these writers dealt with issues which were out of bounds in American literature.

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton were both widely exposed to European influences during their formative years.[13] Chopin's upbringing by her French

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[11] Nathaniel Hawthorne in a letter to his publisher William D. Ticknor, dated January 1855. Quoted in Frank L. Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 122.

[12] Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York, [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1992) 5.

[13] My main sources of information on Kate Chopin's life and work are: Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press and Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969); Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of The Awakening* (London, [etc.]: Century, 1991); Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Nancy A. Walker, *Kate Chopin: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Palgrave, 2001). For biographical information on Edith Wharton, I have turned to Wharton's autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934; London, [etc.]: Century Hutchinson, 1987) and her letters, collected in R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York, [etc.]: Collier Books, 1988). I have furthermore consulted: R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975; London: Vintage, 1993); Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*

Creole maternal family and her education at the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart, where French language and mores formed an important part of the curriculum, provided her with a background which allowed her to become acquainted with French literature in the original (Toth 1991, 87-88 and 244). Chopin began as a writer of short stories in the regionalist tradition, but with her novel *The Awakening*, she "broke new thematic and stylistic ground" (Showalter 1991, 65). Although Chopin was aware of the work of other American regionalist writers, such as Ruth McEnery Stuart, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins Freeman,[14] "little in her background would have led her to see herself as part of a tradition of women writers" (Walker 2001, 45). Chopin particularly expressed admiration for, and declared her indebtedness to, the French writer Guy de Maupassant. She actively contributed to making his work available to the American public by translating some of his short stories and offering them for publication. His influence on her work can be recognized in her adaptation of his use of the short story form and in the way in which it stimulated her to deal more freely with the subject of female sexuality. I will argue that Chopin's use of the female adultery motif in her short stories can, at least partly, be attributed to Maupassant's influence on her work.[15] For Chopin, the female adultery motif gave her the opportunity to go beyond the work of her American precursors and contemporaries in writing about the sexual and personal emancipation of women, and the way in which she explored the motif in both her short stories and her novel of female adultery, *The Awakening*, has earned her a unique place in American literature.

Edith Wharton's childhood, a large part of which was spent travelling in Europe, formed the basis of her love of the European Continent, particularly France. Her increasing contention with American society motivated her to settle down permanently in France when she was approaching fifty. Wharton frequently expressed admiration, both in her literary criticism and her letters, for a host of European writers. Wharton's critical writings, as Frederick Wegener points out, "remind us of how lightly this American novelist regarded the writers of the literary tradition to which she belonged."[16] In her essay "The Great American Novel," Wharton complained that American literary criticism dictated that American novels always had to "be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually."[17] In comparison, she felt that "the dense old European order, all compounded of differences and *nuances*, all interwoven with intensities and reticences, with passions and privacies" (GAN;

(1994; London, [etc.]: Penguin Books, 1995); Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1994); Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

[14] Toth 1999, 144, 155, and 189-190.

[15] I am indebted to the most extensive study of Maupassant's influence on the work of Chopin to date: Richard Fusco, *Maupassant and the American Short Story: The Influence of Form at the Turn of the Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

[16] Frederick Wegener, "'Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen': Edith Wharton as a Critical Writer," *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 33.

[17] Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel," *Yale Review*, 16 (July 1927); reprinted in Wegener 1996, 151-159. This citation: p. 152.

Wegener 1996, 154) had incited its writers to produce fiction about the essence of human life and experience. Inspired by the work of her European colleagues, she wanted to deal with subjects that the American literary establishment considered inappropriate, but that she felt gave her the opportunity to reveal the depth of human emotions and the workings of a society that she herself had found so restrictive, both in terms of her writing and her private life. In her book *Delicate Pursuit: Discretion in Henry James and Edith Wharton*, Jessica Levine argues that Wharton, like James, was primarily inspired by French classical drama and realist fiction to introduce the subject of illicit sexuality, and specifically adulterous love, into her own work.[18] In discussing Wharton's short stories on female adultery as part of a wider European tradition of short story work involving this literary motif, I will specifically address Wharton's reluctance to represent the sexual dimension of the adulterous affair.

For Chopin and Wharton, the work of their European literary examples were sources of inspiration for the use of the female adultery motif. Rather than imitating the way in which subjects like female adultery were addressed in European literature, however, Chopin and Wharton developed their own creative and critical response to the issues which the use of this motif raised.

ii. Censorship and moral governance

The frequent use of the female adultery motif in turn-of-the-century literature is remarkable, in view of the fact that contemporary print culture was generally characterized by a highly critical attitude towards the depiction of illicit love in literature. Especially in Britain and America, where Victorian prudery had a dominant influence on the publication and distribution of literature, female adultery was regarded as an inadmissible topic, particularly if it was used to express dissenting views on the role of women in contemporary society or if it included references, however oblique, to female sexuality.

In America, the publication and distribution of literature was strongly influenced by the activities of so-called vice societies, which originated after the end of the Civil War and which remained active until well into the twentieth century.[19] They were, as Paul Boyer terms it, "the institutional embodiment of

[18] Jessica Levine, *Delicate Pursuit: Discretion in Henry James and Edith Wharton* (New York, [etc.]: Routledge, 2002). The professional relationship of James and Wharton has been widely discussed, and I do not intend to enter into the debate on Wharton's indebtedness to James's work. I tend to agree with Levine that "some of the similarities between these two authors were generated by their analogous cultural positions" (Levine, 11). Both authors were products of privileged New York families, but left their home country to settle down in Europe.

[19] Important sources of information on the influence of the vice societies on American print culture are: Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 1-52; Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 3, 118, 161-167. Although these movements opposed vice, they are generally referred to as vice societies, rather than anti-vice societies. Boyer specifically mentions

the disapproving stare" (Boyer, 10). By using "a subtle combination of social pressure, legislation, and selective court action" (Boyer, 11), they were successful in repressing literature which they felt would debauch and corrupt the American reading public. The Comstock Act of 1973, for example, made it illegal to send through the mail all kinds of materials which were considered obscene or lascivious. Thus the distribution of literary publications which were not considered respectable, whether in books or magazines, could be arrested. Although the vice societies were the chief advocates of a "genteel code" (Boyer, 20), there was, in fact, a large degree of consensus about the need to shield the American public from reading literature which was considered blasphemous or in violation of good taste. The activities of the vice societies could only be so effective because they found general support among those who controlled the literary market. Literary censorship, as Boyer points out, was, in fact, "the sum total of countless small decisions by editors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, critics, and – occasionally – vice societies, all based on a common conception of literary propriety" (Boyer, 20). Publishers of newspapers and magazines and editors in publishing companies reverted to pre-publication censorship by refusing to accept literary work which they felt would be considered offensive and by requiring writers to make changes. The policy of libraries was aimed at restricting the collection by banning controversial books from the shelves.[20]

American writers were generally well aware of the limitations that the literary establishment imposed on their work, and they knew they had to take anticipatory measures in order to ensure the acceptance of potentially contentious literary work. They were obliged to exercise self-restraint in introducing controversial subjects and in expressing opinions which challenged the accepted social and moral views. They, for example, realized they had to avoid explicit reference in their work to transgressive sexual relationships. According to Paul Boyer, "the vast majority of authors worked comfortably within [the] limitations" (Boyer, 18) with which they were confronted, although writers were also at times frustrated by the sometimes rather erratic and unpredictable judgements of publishers with regard to submitted work.

The need for self-censorship may be perceived by the writer as crippling, but it may also be translated into a positive force, an impetus to address the limitations with which s/he is faced. Censorship then becomes productive and constitutive.[21] There is, however, a difference between these two forms of

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the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded by Anthony Comstock in 1873, the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, a.k.a. the Watch and Ward Society, founded in Boston in 1878, by J.F. Chase. He explains the origins of the vice societies as being "a response to deep-seated fears about the drift of urban life in the post-Civil War years" (Boyer, 3). Beisel points out that "Comstock's standards for decency in art spawned the word Comstockery to denote prudery" (Beisel, 3).

[20] Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939: A Study in Cultural Change* (Westport, CT, [etc.]: Greenwood Press, 1984) 20-27, 29-40, 84-93. See also Boyer, 31-32.

[21] Beate Müller points out that generally a distinction is made between 'regulatory' and 'constitutive' (or 'structural') censorship, whereby the former term is used to refer to pre- or post-publication control, while the latter two terms refer to a situation in which repression is

censorship. Self-censorship, I would suggest, is an essentially defensive approach, which results in a writer's avoidance of topics which are likely to cause controversy, or the treatment of such topics in a way that does not question or subvert accepted social and moral standards. In the case of constitutive censorship, on the other hand, writers are compelled to investigate strategies of dealing with controversial topics in such a way that their views can find expression, while their work stays within the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and therefore publishable. I do not mean to suggest that these two types of censorship are diametrically opposed. Rather, I would argue, self-censorship and constitutive censorship can be seen as belonging to a continuum, with no clear demarcation between the two. Writers may, moreover, not always be fully conscious of the way in which they operate with regard to censorship. The internalization of society's moral standards may subconsciously result in the decision to avoid certain subversive topics or to address them with a certain amount of reservation. The writer will not necessarily perceive this as self-censorship. At the same time, the use of narrative strategies may not only be aimed at circumventing the restrictions imposed by the literary market. A writer is likely to strive for a literary work which meets both his/her own standards and those of the publishers and readers, not only commercially, but also artistically, and effectively, in terms of giving expression to his/her views.

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton realized that, by introducing the female adultery motif in their fiction, they were defying the existing rules of the contemporary literary market. Their ongoing debates with the literary establishment, which are reflected in letters they exchanged with their publishers, as well as in their publication strategies, reveal that they, albeit grudgingly, accepted that they were not entirely free to write what they wanted. I will argue that the restrictive literary climate of turn-of-the-century America inspired Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton to develop narrative strategies which enabled them to make a controversial topic like female adultery palatable to the American literary establishment. I am aware that both writers were probably not always fully conscious of the strategic nature of their narrative choices. However, I will argue that, taken together with their determination to introduce the European tradition of the female adultery motif into American literature, their narrative strategies may be seen as part of a considered effort to circumvent the restrictions with which they were faced.

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regarded as an enabling and formative force for the artist. Beate Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory," *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004) 1-31. Müller bases her definition of constitutive censorship on Pierre Bourdieu, "Censorship and the Imposition of Form," *Language and Symbolic Power,* trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 137-159, and on Judith Butler, "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor," *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert C. Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998) 247-259. For an approach to censorship which takes into account various responses to it, see also: Helen Freshwater, "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship," *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004) 225-245.

I will moreover suggest that Chopin's and Wharton's narrative strategies are linked to a dimension of censorship which is not generally labelled as such, but for which I want to propose the term 'dismissive censorship.' By this I mean the response to a literary work or works, which is characterized by the refusal, either consciously or unconsciously, to acknowledge that the artist is using his/her work to give expression to views which question the moral, social, or religious opinions of the addressee. A reader's resistance to a writer's potentially subversive views may result in the denial that these views are expressed. The writer's ideological message is simply ignored, generally because it is in opposition to the accepted moral and social values or religious beliefs. Dismissive censorship can only be effective when views are expressed covertly or implicitly. Because dismissive censorship aims at enervating a writer's work, it can be seen as a regulatory receptive activity, which contributes to a conspiracy of silence, censoring any overt challenges to society's moral standards and ignoring implied criticism of social mores. It is difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to establish this type of censorship at the level of the individual reader. However, when the general response to a particular (body of) work is characterized by a conspicuous negation of potentially subversive material, then this might indicate dismissive censorship. The degree to which an author succeeds in breaking through the censorious reading of his/her audience determines the effectiveness of his/her authorship in terms of the transmission of views. I will argue that Edith Wharton was more successful in achieving this than Kate Chopin, because Wharton, unlike Chopin, attained an authorial status which strengthened her position as a social critic.

The influence of the censorious literary climate of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America on Chopin's and Wharton's writing is easily underestimated when we look at their work through modern eyes. Even if they may not have consciously adapted their writing to meet the requirements of the literary market, I will argue that it not only influenced their work, but also the way in which they manifested themselves as professional writers.

iii. Narrative strategies

In studying Chopin's and Wharton's narrative strategies in their female adultery stories, I will focus on their choice of the short story, rather than the novel, on their choice of certain subgenres of the short story, and on their techniques concerning narrative point of view. I will examine Chopin's and Wharton's use of point of view with reference to the methodology developed by Susan Sniader Lanser in *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction.*[22]

[22] Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). Lanser acknowledges indebtedness to the work of a number of scholars, among which: Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Dorit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978);

Lanser's poetics of point of view is aimed at demonstrating that narrative point of view in fiction is an instrument which a writer may use to condition, even manipulate, the reader's response to a text. Because, as Lanser argues, "point of view has powerful potential for structuring discourse either to evade or to obscure censorship" (Lanser 1981, 101), its strategic use can be particularly effectual for writers who work in a literary market that does not allow the unrestricted expression of an ideology which challenges accepted moral values. The use of point of view techniques may enhance the effectiveness of the text in putting across the author's ideas and opinions.

Lanser's theory focuses on prose fiction, and although she demonstrates the application of her methodology through a reading of two short stories, she does not differentiate between point of view in different genres of prose fiction. However, I propose that the writer's choice of genre and subgenre is of great significance with regard to the narrator's expression of his or her ideological stance. The specific characteristics of the genre of the short story and of certain subgenres influence the way in which point of view is used. I will therefore start with an exploration of some of these characteristics.

iii.a. The short story genre

The short story genre appears to have offered nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers the possibility to express subversive opinions which were likely to be censored if they were put forward in a novel.[23] In particular the brevity of the form, the flexibility which the short story offered in terms of its ending or closure, and common practice with regard to the publication of short stories are important genre characteristics in this respect.

Implicitly, short story writers expect their readers to be familiar with the economic, social, and emotional implications of an adulterous affair in contemporary society, so that they can restrict the amount of explanatory information to a minimum. In his essay "The short story: The short of it," Allan Pasco argues that "[t]he limited span of the short story makes it virtually impossible to introduce new or strange worlds to the reader," and that therefore "certain topics are inappropriate for the genre."[24] Short story writers "have to assume considerable background on the part of the reader, a background that may or may not be present in a particular individual at a

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Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), translated as *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Boris Uspenskii, *Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. Valentin Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

[23] Mary Louise Pratt's discussion on the relationship between the novel and the short story in "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It" is very insightful on the subject of the role of the genre in the expression of subversive opinions (Poetics 10 (1981): 175-194).

[24] Allan H. Pasco, "The short story: The short of it," Style, 27. 3 (Fall 1993): 447.

particular time" (Pasco, 447). When we apply this premise to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female adultery short stories, it can be argued that writers worked on the assumption that their readers were entirely familiar with transgressive love and its social, economic and moral implications, either through personal experience, or because they had read or gossiped about it. Contemporary newspaper reports on divorce cases and sensation novels were extremely popular reading, and female adultery was a not uncommon topic in the literary classics and, of course, the Bible. Readers and writers therefore built on a shared knowledge and understanding. Writers could start *in medias res* and assume that their readers had sufficient background to understand what was at stake when a married woman had a transgressive love affair.

If female adultery was not an unknown topic for nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, it was certainly controversial, particularly when the focus was on the adulterous desire of the married woman or on the woman's liberation, for it is especially in this type of story that the traditional role and behaviour of women is challenged. Mary Louise Pratt points out that the short story is often used "to introduce new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters into the literary arena" (Pratt 1981, 187). Writers may have felt the short story particularly suitable for dealing with the topic of female adultery and issues related to it, because the literary form was likely to draw less of a reader's lasting attention. As Norman Friedman points out, the brevity of the form may incite readers to read more attentively, paying more attention to detail, but the opposite is also true: "[Be]cause a short story takes less time to read, even though we may remember its details for a while, it may make *less* of an impression on us in the long run than a novel, simply because we spend less time with it."[25] The limited timespan involved in reading a short story may ensure the reader's attention for its subject matter for the duration of the reading process, but it may also result in the reader forgetting the story's contents sooner than when s/he had spent a longer time absorbing it, as in the case of a novel.

In addition, the attention for a short story's subject matter was influenced by the manner in which it was generally published. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of short stories were traditionally written to be published in a magazine. When appearing in a magazine, the reader's attention would not be singularly focused on one isolated short story, but would be divided over the various contributions to the edition. As Pratt observes: "The magazine context implies distracted reception in brief moments between other activities" (Pratt 1981, 192), that is the reading of other items in the magazine. Collections of short stories by a particular author generally contained reprints of short stories, with the possible addition of a few new stories. Even if a short story was reprinted in a collection of short stories, a single story about a controversial subject could be compensated for with one or

[25] Norman Friedman, "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, [etc.]: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 26. Friedman's italics.

more stories of an irreproachable nature. The introduction of controversial subjects in a short story would consequently draw less critical attention than in a novel. The difference with the serialized publication of a novel is that a novel's instalment would draw the reader's attention as a recognized part of a larger whole, triggering the reader's memory of earlier chapters and arousing certain expectations with regard to the story's continuation. The serial publication of a novel by a well-known writer could attract readers to a particular magazine, and result in its defamation when a subject and/or its treatment were considered too offensive. It would seem, then, that the short story offered writers more freedom to express subversive opinions without getting into difficulties with their publishers and readers.

The particular significance of the ending, or closure, of the short story may have been a further reason why authors found the short story a suitable medium for the female adultery motif. In the conventional nineteenth-century novel which centred on a love interest, writers generally resorted to a traditional ending: the marriage of the protagonists or, alternatively, the death of the hero, but more often the heroine. The novel of female adultery had its own tradition, which usually entailed the punishment of the adulteress, not seldom in the form of her premature death. Whether or not such a judgemental ending reflected the ideology of the author, the novel required a definite resolution. The short story gave writers greater flexibility with regard to closure. They could opt for a variety of endings that have come to characterize the short story genre, such as the epiphanic moment, the open ending, or the sudden twist. It offered writers the possibility to imply plot resolutions that could not be made explicit and allowed them to intimate moral judgements which did not reflect the accepted moral judgements of contemporary society, but instead more subversive, alternative ideas.

Closure in short stories has been a point of special interest in literary criticism. As John Gerlach observes: "The short story is that genre in which anticipation of the ending is always present."[26] Critics have drawn attention to various types of endings, to signals that indicate impending closure, and to what has been termed by Susan Lohafer as 'preclosure,' the notion in the reader's mind that a story could end at a certain point, even though it does not.[27] The critical interest in closure is directed at investigating the significance of certain patterns of closure in relation to the development of the short story. It is, for example, generally thought that the surprise ending is especially characteristic of short stories of the early nineteenth century, whereas the modern short story frequently has more open or indeterminate endings.

Thomas Leitch, in his article "The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story," offers a challenging suggestion about the role of closure in a large number of American short stories. Leitch distinguishes between two kinds

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[26] John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) 160.

[27] Susan Lohafer, "Preclosure and Story Processing," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads,* eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, [etc]: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 249-275.

of stories, anecdotal and epiphanic.[28] Whereas the former type is based on a series of actions, which form "an intelligible plot" (Leitch, 131) with a clear beginning, middle, and end, the latter type proceeds to a climactic revelation. Epiphanic stories tend to be "about what happens to the principals rather than what they actively do" (Leitch, 131) and are often antithetical in nature, that is, based on the movement of a belief or situation from one extreme to its opposite. Whatever the type of story, they are all, Leitch argues, "shaped by our expectation of an imminent teleology" (Leitch, 132). Even if the reader accepts that s/he does not fully grasp everything while reading, in the end s/he expects things to fall into place and come to a logical conclusion. If not, the reader is likely to feel dissatisfied. In the case of anecdotal stories, a series of actions or events will usually bring about such a conclusion. A story can be said to be epiphanic, if it ends with "a revelation detached from any particular course of action, or if the audience alone perceives the pattern which makes the story's events intelligible" (Leitch, 132). While the reader expects to be offered "a stable sense of closure" (Leitch, 133), Leitch proposes that short stories of the epiphanic type may also take away "illusions about the world the story presents and represents without substituting any positive or more comprehensive wisdom" (Leitch, 133). In other words, the fact that insight is achieved and that false assumptions have been removed does not necessarily mean that new assurances are provided. Leitch argues that this type of closure, this "debunking rhythm," as he calls it (Leitch, 132), is a particularly American phenomenon. It falls outside the scope of this study to address his claim with regard to American literature in general, but I will argue that the type of closure that Leitch describes can be recognized in Edith Wharton's female adultery short stories and that it plays a vital role in the expression or elusiveness of the ideological stance of her narrators.

For nineteenth-century writers, then, the short story was an interesting alternative to the novel as a literary vehicle for female adultery. Chopin and Wharton addressed the topic in both genres. Kate Chopin's literary fame is for the greater part based on her female adultery novel *The Awakening*, but she experimented with the use of the motif in a number of her early short stories, which were predominantly written in the regionalist mode. On the basis of the critical reception of her early short stories, Chopin's decision to write her version of the novel of female adultery suggests that she expected a certain degree of tolerance on the part of her readers with regard to such a risqué subject. The negative response to *The Awakening* therefore came as an unpleasant surprise, and Chopin's disappointment suggests that she had underestimated the critical exposure of a novel on such a controversial subject.

In Wharton's novels, female adultery never has the pivotal role that it has in her short stories. Wharton claims that her choice of genre was determined by what she wanted to achieve by introducing a particular subject matter. In

[28] Thomas M. Leitch, "The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, [etc]: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 130.

"Telling a Short Story," a separate chapter on the short story in her critical study *The Writing of Fiction*, she argues that every subject "must necessarily contain within itself its own dimension,"[29] and that it is one of the writer's tasks to discern whether a subject is more suited to a novel or to a short story. The short story should present "the moral drama at its culmination" (WF, 34), and should be "a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience" (WF, 29). Even though female adultery plays a pivotal role in some of her short stories, Wharton generally avoids the depiction of the affair itself, concentrating instead, for example, on the moment when the adulteress realizes that the illicit affair is not going to release her from the restrictions imposed upon her life by the expectations that society has of her. In Wharton's short stories, the adulterous affair of the wife never results in a happy ending. Wharton may have seen this plot development as necessary in order to get her story accepted by newspapers and magazines; it can also be interpreted as a reflection of her view that the escape from an unsatisfactory marriage and from the confines of patriarchal society was, in fact, impossible.

iii.b. Subgenres of the short story

Although female adultery was generally considered to be an unsuitable topic, it was not completely absent from all forms of published writing, fiction and non-fiction, in nineteenth-century America. Apart from the fact that it was discussed in newspapers and magazines as part of the public debate on marriage related issues, it was considered an acceptable element in some subgenres of prose fiction, such as sensation literature. The different degrees of acceptance of a particular topic appear to be related to the reader's knowledge and understanding of the existence of different types of literary texts and his or her expectations when confronted with a certain kind of discourse. These aspects may be influenced by paratextual signals, such as the title, the author's name, the addition of, for example, epigraphs, dedications or illustrations, and the context in which the work is published (Lanser 1981, 123-128). All these elements are likely to influence the reader's attitude towards a fictional work, even before s/he has started reading the actual text. Publishers and readers are likely to have certain expectations about the nature of a literary work, depending on the conventions attached to a particular subgenre. Thus, when a reader expects a satirical short story, s/he will accept that certain controversial topics will be introduced to satirize existing social practices. And the reader of a short story in the sensation genre will expect to be entertained with a plot filled with a wide variety of extreme and often transgressive acts and behaviour.

In nineteenth-century America, it appears that a writer's choice to work in a certain subgenre was often not primarily determined by ideological or artistic

[29] Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (1925; New York: Touchstone, 1997) 33.

considerations. Rather, it was largely determined by the demands of the literary market, especially if pecuniary rewards were more important than artistic freedom. In his book, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, Richard Brodhead reconstructs the emergence of the literary industry in mid-nineteenth-century America and examines how this influenced the work and literary career of authors. He argues that the "dominant world of writing" at the time was "the highly vicarious, highly managed, privacy-addressing, mass-public one," and that "the central fact of literary life then was that a writer who hoped to reach a significant public would have to engage a communication system structured on those terms."[30] Writers had an increasing variety of outlets for their work, which "helped make literary writing a commercially viable career" (Brodhead, 77). Magazines and newspapers had their own character, representing different literary cultures, and to a large extent also had different audiences (Brodhead, 76-80). Aligning oneself with a particular publisher, or type of publication, often entailed producing a certain genre of fiction and, consequently, attaching a particular reputation to one's name or pseudonym.

The choice of subgenre, then, was an important factor in the literary self-construction of a writer. The American women writers Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott, for example, both made conscious decisions with regard to the literary subgenres they employed. Novelist and columnist Fanny Fern became famous because of her satirical sketches, in which she felt free to raise any topic that she wanted, including the adulterous inclinations of married women. The readers of her so-called "Fern Leaves," the columns which brought her unprecedented fame, came to expect her to address certain topics in order to ridicule the existing marital conventions. Louisa May Alcott, on the other hand, whose reputation as a writer was mainly based on her fiction for young adults, began to write sensation fiction because it helped her to secure a much-needed income from her writing. She never published her "rubbishy tales,"[31] as she referred to them, under her own name, but chose to do so anonymously, or under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, adopting a different literary identity for a different kind of literary product. Both Fern and Alcott remained faithful to the conventions of the subgenres they chose to work in. The introduction of female adultery in their work served a purpose which concurred with that of the chosen genre.

Kate Chopin is often associated with regionalist, or local colour literature.[32] Her choice to write in the regionalist genre was also largely motivated by the fact that these stories were sought after by publishers. The period of her married life in New Orleans and Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana,

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[30] Richard H. Brodhead, *Culture of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) 68.

[31] Ednah Dow Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889); reprinted in Madeleine B. Stern, Introduction, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers*, by Louisa May Alcott (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) xiii.

[32] The terms 'regionalist' and 'local colour' are often used interchangeably. I will return to the issue of the finer distinctions between the two terms in chapter 4.

prior to the start of her literary career, had provided her with the inspiration for the depiction of life in the American South. The regional setting of Chopin's early stories enabled her to relate events and create situations which many of her readers would consider too shocking when associated with those segments of American society that read her stories. It put a comfortable distance between the reader and the story world, which allowed Chopin to address controversial topics without confronting her readers too directly with the moral issues involved. Whether she consciously exploited the regionalist genre in this way is unclear. However, the acceptance of and appreciation for her regionalist stories may have led her to believe that the American literary establishment was ready to accept stories about risqué topics such as female adultery. It encouraged her to continue to explore them in short stories which were not written in the regionalist genre, but in a style which had been inspired by the work of her European example, Guy de Maupassant. Although she continued to use regional settings for her fiction throughout her career, Chopin wanted to shake off the reputation she had built up in the early years of her career and gain recognition as a modern, more versatile author. Chopin's attempts to construct a new literary identity, through the writing of a novel and of short stories designed for more avant-garde publishers and a new readership, were not as successful as she had hoped. Her reputation as a regionalist writer had become something of a stigma, which she found difficult to discard and which continued to determine the way she was judged as an author.

For Edith Wharton, the choice of subgenre appears to have been a less problematic issue. The majority of Edith Wharton's short stories can be characterized as stories of 'manners and morals.' However, Wharton also had a special taste for ghost stories and she wrote around twenty of them in the course of her literary career. Wharton's ghost stories that deal with the transgressive love of a married woman consequently offer an interesting variant on Wharton's other female adultery short stories. The ghost story and the female adultery motif, with their shared emphasis on secrecy and the hidden, are particularly suited to each other. The historical and exotic settings of her ghost stories place the adulterous woman in a different social context. Wharton could criticize marital relations in a patriarchal society which belonged to a safely distant past and location, although at the same time mirroring the nineteenth-century New York society that formed Wharton's more usual backdrop. Wharton's ghost stories therefore did not form a breach with her 'manners and morals' stories, because they essentially addressed the same issues.

iii.c. Point of view

My analysis of the female adultery short stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton will focus on their use of point of view techniques in the narrative

text. My methodological framework, as I pointed out above, will be Susan Lanser's study of point of view in prose fiction. Lanser's methodology is based on the systematic analysis of the status of the narrative voice, of the kinds and modes of contact between the narrator and the reader, and the stance which a narrator takes toward the fictional persons and events. I have chosen not to use Lanser's methodology as a prescriptive procedure. Rather, I will use it heuristically, as a guideline for my analysis of point of view in my corpus of Chopin and Wharton stories. In doing so, I will emphasize those aspects which I have found to be particularly revealing with regard to Chopin's and Wharton's use of the female adultery motif.

Lanser distinguishes five levels of textual voice in a narrative text: the extrafictional voice, and the voices of the public narrator, the private narrator, the focalizer, and the character(s) (Lanser 1981, 122-148). In every text, she argues, there is an extrafictional voice which is "the most direct textual counterpart for the historical author" (Lanser 1981, 122). The extrafictional voice is "responsible for the very existence of the fictional world, the characters, their names, and personalities, the organization of the plot" (Lanser 1981, 123) and may be equated with the "implied author," a term first coined by Wayne Booth, and perhaps the more widely-used term for the authorial representative (Lanser 1981, 49-50).[33] The extrafictional voice "conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority. All other voices that the text creates are subordinate to it" (Lanser 1981, 128). The extrafictional voice may not be part of the story world, but when reading a fictional text its presence remains significant, even if hidden, because we hold it ultimately responsible for the text (Lanser 1981, 131-132). At the same time, the relationship between the historical author and his/her most immediate narrative counterpart is complex, and the less experienced reader may not appreciate the distinction between the two and may tend to equate them (Lanser 1981, 132n). Lanser suggests: "Rather than accepting a dictum that the two are always separate entities, I [. . .] suggest that under certain conditions, some kinds of narrators are associated by competent readers with the authorial voice" (Lanser 1981, 8). I realize that the implied author, or as Lanser defines it in her book, the extrafictional voice, is one of the more controversial issues in narratology, and I do not intend to open yet another discussion on the existence, nature, or role of either. Although I recognize the distinct roles of the historical and the implied author *vis-à-vis* the narrative text, I will not be concerned with it in my analysis of the various stories that I discuss in this study, and I will refer to the authors whose work I discuss in the sense of both the historical person and the authorial representative in the text.

At the level of the narrators, Lanser distinguishes a public and a private narrator. Lanser's public narrator may or may not be a (central) character in the story and has the task of creating the fictional world for the reader, whom s/he addresses directly or indirectly (Lanser 1981, 157-160). Lanser uses the somewhat obscure term public narrator alongside the more conventional and

[33] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; London, [etc.]: Penguin Books, 1991) 70-77.

more generally known terms, third-person and first-person narrator. Since, as Lanser herself also recognizes, these latter terms are probably less confusing, I prefer to use them throughout. The second narrative persona which Lanser distinguishes is the private narrator, who is normally a character in the story and incapable of addressing personae outside the fictional context. His/her audience is limited to that of other fictional characters. The term private narrator is, again, rather obscure, and I therefore prefer the more generally accepted term embedded narrator.

Lanser borrows one of Genette's terms for the third narrative persona she distinguishes, the focalizer, whom she defines as "the presence – the recorder, the camera, the consciousness – through whose spatial, temporal, and/or psychological position the textual events are perceived" (Lanser 1981, 141). The focalizer is "a kind of medium" (Lanser 1981, 142), through which the narrator is allowed to be present on the story scene or in the mind of a character. Lanser argues: "When the text brings a level of focalization into existence, one voice is narrating while another consciousness is responsible for the perceptions, thoughts, feelings, or orientation to the scene that the narrator, in turn, relays" (Lanser 1981, 141-142). The various narrative levels are highly dependent on each other. Lanser refers to it as "*a chain of authority* in the narrative structure created by the text" (Lanser 1981, 146; Lanser's italics), which links the different narrative personae, ranging from the story's character(s) to the extrafictional voice. Each of the narrative personae has a function in creating the narrative world and they depend on each other for providing access to the different narrative levels.

Lanser not only examines the various possibilities with regard to the status of the narrative voice, she also investigates "the kinds and modes of *contact* which the narrator establishes with the textual readership, and [. . .] the *stance* the narrator takes toward the fictional persons and events" (Lanser 1981, 174; Lanser's italics). Lanser distinguishes four, closely interrelated levels on which stance operates: the phraseological, the spatio-temporal, the psychological, and the ideological planes (Lanser 1981, 184-185). At the phraseological level, we are primarily concerned with the types of discourse used by the narrator (Lanser 1981, 185-191). The spatio-temporal stance determines the narrator's relationship to the textual world, both in terms of place and time (Lanser 1981, 191-201). The spatial stance determines whether the narrator is inside or outside the story scene, whereas the temporal stance affects both the pace of the narration and the time that has elapsed between the moment when the narrated events take place and the moment when the narrator recounts them (Lanser 1981, 198). The psychological stance determines the narrator's distance or affinity to each character or event represented in the text (Lanser 1981, 201-202) and influences the quantity of information which the narrator provides, but also the colouring of the presentation of the information. The narrator's ideological stance, finally, is closely linked to the psychological stance. As Lanser says: "A narrator may signal a psychological affinity with a character by giving that character his or

her own ideology; conversely, psychological affinity for a character can suggest an ideological affinity as well" (Lanser 1981, 215). However, Lanser stresses the distinction between the two, by exploring three issues concerning a narrator's or character's ideology: the way the ideology is expressed, how the ideology itself relates to what is referred to as the culture text, "the world view operating in a given time and place" (Lanser 1981, 56),[34] and the amount of power and authority held by the narrative voice (Lanser 1981, 216).

I will investigate the dominant patterns in Chopin's and Wharton's employment of first-person, third-person, and embedded narrators and in the relationships which these narrators have with the focalizer(s) in the stories they recount. I will furthermore analyse aspects of the narrator's stance, with an emphasis on what Lanser terms the phraseological, psychological, and ideological stance, in order to examine what it reveals about the narrator's position *vis-à-vis* female adultery and the transgressive woman, and what that in turn suggests about Chopin's and Wharton's ideology.

I will devote special attention to the use of imagery, which is of significant influence on "the degree to which ideology is expressed literally or figurally" (Lanser 1981, 217). The use of imagery, like the use of rhetorical devices, may imply a certain ideology. Lanser suggests that "[i]t is probable that the more deeply embedded an ideology, the greater the chance of being apprehended subliminally and accepted without argument" (Lanser 1981, 216-217). A writer may therefore prefer the figural approach, if the ideological expression diverges from or is in opposition to the culture text. It is then likely to attract less outright negative response, while it may be effective through its influence on the subconsciousness of the reader.

Fictional point of view, Lanser argues, can be seen as "a reflection of social structures and communicative activity in the historical world" and posits "a homology between the narrative structure *within* the fictional discourse and the rhetorical structure which *produces* the discourse – between the structures of art and social life" (Lanser 1981, 102; Lanser's italics). She postulates a "homologous relation between point of view in narrative and the writer's position *vis-à-vis* the literary act" (Lanser 1981, 263). In other words, the way in which an author narrates a story, employs narrative point of view, is indicative of the way in which s/he perceives his/her writing and authorial position. Lanser moreover argues that "[i]n women's fiction the homologous levels of point view often merge with striking clarity," because the position of women as writers has been "strongly determined by gender, frequently overshadowing individual differences among women writers and affecting most dramatically women whose writings oppose the culture text" (Lanser 1981, 264). In my concluding chapter, I will apply this aspect of Lanser's theory to Chopin's and Wharton's work and address the question whether their use of point of view betrays a gendered authorial voice, which influenced the contemporary acceptance of their short stories on a controversial topic like

[34] Lanser borrowed this term from J.M. Lotman, "Point of View in a Text," *New Literary History* 6.2 (1975): 339- 341.

female adultery and affected the extent to which they were successful in putting across their views and in achieving their literary ambitions, whether they, in the Lanser's terms, achieved "discursive authority."[35]

iv. Literary ambitions

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton both used the female adultery motif to address the changing role of women in society and the conflict between society's expectations of women and women's personal expectations of life. For Chopin, the female adultery motif offered her the opportunity to address the subject of female sexuality and the sexual emancipation of American women. Wharton predominantly used the motif to underline her view of women's entrapment in the social confines of turn-of-the-century America. I will argue, however, that the wish to express certain views was not the only incentive for the recurrent use of the female adultery motif. It also reflected their ambition to be seen as writers who not only wrote to secure an income, but who also wanted to be recognized as literary artists.

The development of the female adultery motif in Chopin's work can be interpreted as part of her strategy to shake off her image of regionalist writer and to be recognized as a writer who transcended the regional boundaries to deal with universal themes in a style which aligned her work with that of her more daring European contemporaries. Chopin continuously skirted the borders of what was deemed acceptable in nineteenth-century American fiction. In her early short stories, which were predominantly written in the regionalist genre, this did not attract much attention. As becomes clear from the contemporary reviews of her collections *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, the critics mainly noticed Chopin's adeptness at depicting the regional world of the American South and they appeared not to notice, or at least did not comment on, the fact that she addressed issues which were potentially subversive. The response of her early critics, even though it was generally positive, annoyed Chopin on account of its superficiality. She had the ambition to be recognized as a more avant-garde writer and she consciously strove to get her short story work accepted by periodicals aimed at a more progressive audience, such as *Vogue*.

Her efforts at novel writing are another indication of Chopin's decision to widen her literary horizon. Whereas the short story was the more commonly used genre for regionalist writers, Chopin, early on in her career, embarked upon her first novel, *At Fault*, soon followed by a second novel, which remained unpublished. When she started writing *The Awakening*, it appears she assumed that the literary market was ready for an American version of the novel of female adultery, which had already become something of a literary tradition in

[35] Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca, NY, [etc.]: Cornell University Press, 1992) 6-7. In this book Lanser elaborates on the argument which she postulates in her earlier book and introduces the term "discursive authority."

Continental Europe, but which was considered inappropriate in America. But whereas the subversive subject nature of her short stories had not raised the eyebrows of her critics and publishers, the response to *The Awakening* was predominantly negative. She did not get the chance to fully rehabilitate herself during her lifetime. It was only after the rediscovery of Chopin's work, decades after her death, that the novel came to be valued for the unique place it holds in American turn-of-the-century literature.

Edith Wharton's parentage did not make it obvious for her to pursue a literary career. For a woman of her social background, it was considered inappropriate to be a professional writer and Wharton's family and social peers always ignored her achievements as an author, even after she had become very successful. Her authorship was important to Wharton, however, because it provided her with an alternative to the life she would have been expected to lead. Throughout her life, she constructed and carefully maintained an image of the society lady, who conscientiously worked at a career as a versatile writer, not only of fiction, but also of various kinds of non-fiction. Whereas her fiction depicts the lives of men and women who are formed and restricted by the manners and morals of the society from which she stemmed, her non-fiction tends to evoke her ideal world and at the same time confirms her image as a connoisseur, cosmopolitan, and intellectual. Her books on architecture, interior decoration, and garden design offer descriptions of attractive and comfortable living environments. In her travel books, she takes her readers on tours of architectural highlights and beautiful scenery in places which had not yet attracted the attention of mass tourism, and she sets off the particularities of foreign societies against those of her home country. The literary criticism which she wrote more frequently as her career progressed reveals her wide reading in various languages and her efforts to contribute to the development of her art.

Wharton wanted to be part of a literary tradition which dared to look beyond the borders of America, not only geographically, but also socially and morally. Following in the footsteps of her friend and precursor Henry James, she continuously reverted to a topic which was primarily associated with French society and literature, but which she used to address the position of women in contemporary American society. Wharton was not very optimistic about the chances of these women to lead emotionally and spiritually fulfilling lives. She emphasized the impossibility for these wives to escape their predetermined future. For the women in Wharton's female adultery stories, the adulterous affair is an unsuccessful attempt to break free from the social restraints, symbolized by their unsatisfying marriages. Even when her female adultery stories did not overtly advocate the emancipation of women, they did contribute to the emancipation of American literature.

Wharton tended to refrain from overt allusions to the sexual motivation of her adulteresses for an illicit affair, which made her use of the motif acceptable according to the unwritten laws of the American literary market place. Occasionally she chose to disregard these laws and to experiment with a more

outspoken way of representing female adultery. In the unpublished "Beatrice Palmato fragment," she candidly depicts a sexual encounter between a young woman and an older man, who is probably her father. The incestuous nature of the relationship has generally determined how the fragment is read and appreciated. However, the explicit reference to the daughter's recent marriage links the fragment to the use of female adultery in literature. The text, as a result, forms a significant addition to Wharton's female adultery stories because it emphasizes an aspect of the adulteress's motivation which could not be addressed in her published work.

The recurrent use in her fiction of illicit love has been remarked upon by a number of Wharton's critics, who have often explained it by pointing out analogies with events in her own life. In fact, Wharton made her own adultery the topic of a highly interesting document, a journal which she wrote during the time of her adulterous relationship with Morton Fullerton. She entitled the journal "The Life Apart," but it is commonly referred to as the "Love Diary." The text appears to belong to the non-fictional genre of the journal. However, in writing the journal, Wharton adhered to many of the principles of writing short stories outlined in *The Writing of Fiction*, which can be recognized in the way she structures her text, plays with the journal's implied readership, and introduces imagery and rhetorical strategies which we also find in her fiction. The journal can be read as a continuous narrative text, which appears to be aimed at a wider audience. Wharton offers a reconstruction and an exploration of her affair, which simultaneously functions as a public testimony. The fact that she allowed both the journal and the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" to survive also suggests that she wanted to reveal to future audiences an alternative side of her authorship, providing an example of the full breadth of her writerly capabilities, unrestrained by the censuring laws of the American literary establishment.

v. Studying Brief Affairs

With this study, I hope to contribute to the critical debate on the female adultery motif in literature by taking an approach which differs in a number of ways from that in existing studies. First of all, I will focus on short stories that deal with female adultery, rather than novels on this topic. Although some critical studies on female adultery in literature also deal with short stories and novellas, it is the *novels* of female adultery, especially those written by men, that have received the widest attention of literary critics and that have been grouped together and treated as a literary phenomenon. Turn-of-the-century short stories in which female adultery is the main or an important issue have, to my knowledge, not been studied as a group in the way that the novels have. This thesis aims at breaking new ground in that respect.

The fictional work of women writers employing the female adultery motif has been largely overlooked in the critical work on the use of the motif produced so far. It is only in recent studies that the work of some turn-of-the-century women writers, in particular Kate Chopin, is included. However, Chopin's short stories on female adultery are predominantly seen as mere finger exercises for her later novel, *The Awakening*. Although Wharton's interest in the female adultery as a literary topic has been widely acknowledged and critics have discussed how she used it in her novels, her short stories on the topic have not been dealt with as a group. I will examine the short stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton in relation to the tradition of female adultery as a literary motif in European literature and in relation to nineteenth-century American women's writing on the subject of female adultery, both in non-fiction and in fiction. In addition, this study aims to reveal the role of these women writers in the development of views on the social and matrimonial position of women as American society moved into the twentieth century.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I places Chopin's and Wharton's female adultery stories in a social and literary context. In chapter 1, I give a brief overview of the most important novels of female adultery dating from the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. I draw an analogy with the way the topic was addressed in the widely read reports on divorce court proceedings and the equally popular sensation novels, and I outline the social context of the female adultery motif in literature. Chapter 2 focuses on the use of female adultery in short stories. I discuss the most important characteristics of the female adultery motif in short stories and illustrate these with examples of stories written by predominantly European writers. I offer tentative conclusions about the momentary representation of a comprehensive topic in short stories versus the more scenic approach favoured in novels. In chapter 3, I discuss three different types of writing on female adultery by American women writers from the second half of the nineteenth century, thus placing the female adultery stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton in a historical perspective. First, I give an impression of the public debate on female adultery in American newspapers and magazines, and more specifically of the contribution of a number of prominent women to that debate, in order to illustrate the public opinion on the role of marriage in patriarchal society and the rights and duties of women in marriage. Then, I discuss how and why the choice for certain subgenres of fiction enabled and motivated two well-known contemporary women writers, Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott, to address the controversial topic of female adultery.

Part II deals with the female adultery short stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton. Chapter 4 is devoted to Kate Chopin. In the chapter's first section, I examine the development of Chopin as a writer and I discuss her publishing strategies. I then, in three consecutive sections, analyse the use of point of view in Chopin's stories. First, I discuss her regionalist stories, dating from the start of her career as a writer. Second, I discuss her indebtedness,

both stylistically and thematically, to her French precursor Guy de Maupassant. Third, I focus on Chopin's later stories, in which she increasingly used the female adultery motif to express her view on the importance of women's sexual awakening. The chapter is rounded off with a section on the role of religious imagery in Chopin's female adultery stories.

In chapter 5, I start by considering some aspects of Edith Wharton's authorship, and I discuss the relevance of her non-fictional work as part of her literary *oeuvre*. In the second section, which is divided in five subsections, I examine narrative aspects of Wharton's female adultery stories. In the first three subsections, I examine Wharton's use of narrative point of view in her female adultery stories in the light of her critical writing on the subject, in her book *The Writing of Fiction*. First, I discuss Wharton's use of first-person narrators and suggest its special relevance for stories with a distinct 'ghostly' atmosphere. Second, I examine the effects brought about by a sudden shift of narrative perspective in some of her female adultery stories. And third, I discuss Wharton's increasing tendency to focus on the psychology of the female protagonist. Wharton's third-person narrators allow the reader a deep insight into the mind of the adulteress, thereby, as I argue, simultaneously revealing the narrators' psychological and ideological stance. The fourth subsection is devoted to Wharton's techniques with regard to the opening and closure of her stories, and I suggest how this contributed to the expression of her views. In the final subsection, I examine Wharton's use of imagery in her female adultery stories, reflecting two of her lifelong passions: architecture and interior decoration, on the one hand, and travel, on the other hand.

In chapter 6, I examine Wharton's strategies of indirectness which enabled her to write about female adultery and negotiate her views on the role of women in society and marriage, without being explicitly subversive and running the risk of censorship on account of its uninhibited treatment. In the first section, I examine her rhetorical and metaphorical use of silence in the female adultery stories. In the second section, I offer a reading of the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" as a short story in its own right. My reading consequently highlights the adulterous, rather than the incestuous, nature of the depicted relationship. The third section of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of the journal which she kept at the time of her own adulterous affair with Morton Fullerton. In this journal, as I argue, Wharton employed narrative techniques similar to those used in her short stories. As a result, it can be read as a continuous narrative text, which offers a perspective on her ideas about female adultery that are complementary to those expressed in her fiction.

My concluding remarks, in the final chapter of this study, focus on two aspects. First, I evaluate Chopin's and Wharton's strategic choice of the short story genre in relation to the female adultery motif and I discuss the effects of the genre on Chopin's and Wharton's representation of female adultery. Second, I discuss the relationship between the narrative strategies employed by Chopin and Wharton and their authorial ambitions. Although I do not discuss the critical reception of their work in great detail, I draw conjectural

conclusions about the degree to which they were successful in terms of the negotiation of their views on the position and role of women in contemporary society.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Madame Bovary et aliae
Female adultery in turn-of-the-century literature

The interest in female adultery as a literary motif can be seen as a predominantly nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenon and a direct consequence of the desire of writers to address the problems resulting from the position of women in contemporary society. However, the motif has an impressive literary history. Although there are several examples of female adultery in classical mythology and literature, the motif appears to be rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and should be read in the context of the Seventh Commandment (White & Segal, 2).[1] Both Denis de Rougemont and C.S. Lewis link the introduction into literature of forbidden, adulterous love and its inevitable consequences to the appearance of chivalry and the courtly love tradition, which found expression in Medieval romances, such as those about Tristan and Iseult and about Lancelot and Guinevere.[2] Female adultery has since then remained a topic of great interest for writers of all literary genres throughout the ages. However, the literary exploration of female adultery reached its peak in narrative fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century, which induced Nicholas White and Naomi Segal to term this period "the High Age of Adultery" (White & Segal, 3). The aim of this chapter is to discuss the representation of female adultery in novels of this period, outlining the literary tradition from which Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton emerged and which informed the use of the female adultery motif in their fiction.

1.1. The novel of female adultery

The nineteenth-century Continental European novel of female adultery was not without its literary forerunners. Bill Overton argues that, in France, it was preceded by the Romantic confessional narrative and the narrative of seduction (Overton 1996, 24). However, the first novel that foregrounded the adulterous wife in the manner which would come to characterize the nineteenth-century

[1] "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Exodus 20:14.
[2] Rougemont, 69-71; C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 2-4.

novel of female adultery was Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which was published in France in 1857. Over the following decades, female adultery was taken up in similar ways by writers in various European countries. Along with Flaubert's novel, Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (Russia, 1878) is undoubtedly the most widely known. Others are perhaps less well known, but nonetheless deserve to be placed in the tradition of the female adultery novel of this period. Among them are: Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (Russia, 1865),[3] Leopoldo Alas's (Clarín) *La Regenta* (Spain, 1884/1885), Eça de Queirós's *O Primo Basílio* [*Cousin Bazilio*] (Portugal, 1878), Theodor Fontane's *L'Adultera* and *Effi Briest* (Germany, 1882 and 1896, respectively), Herman Bang's *Ved Vejen* [*Katinka*] (Denmark, 1886),[4] Frederik van Eeden's *Van de Koele Meren des Doods* [*The Deeps of Deliverance*] (The Netherlands, 1900),[5] Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil's *Aşk-ı memnû* [*Forbidden Love*] (Turkey, 1900), and Eduard von Keyserling's *Dumala* (Germany, 1908). Conspicuously, all of the classic examples of the novel of female adultery were written by men. This does not mean, however, that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers did not write about adultery, male or female. I have found several examples of novels involving female adultery by women writers of the period. Nor does the absence of English and American examples of the typical novel of female adultery justify the conclusion that writers in England and America refused to deal with the topic in any form or manner. In fact, female adultery occurs more frequently in English and American literature than is often thought, but writers devised alternative ways of dealing with the topic, in order to make it palatable for their censorious publishers.

The contribution of women writers to the novel of female adultery is substantial. The French writer Madame de Lafayette offers a remarkably early treatment of the topic in what is now regarded as a literary classic, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). And the most famous French woman novelist of the early nineteenth century, George Sand, has rather unjustly, according to Ellen Moers, "always had the reputation, among people who don't read her, for writing about nothing but adultery."[6] The most notable example in Sand's *oeuvre* is probably *Indiana*, first published in 1832, but revised by the writer for later editions. Outside French literature, the little-known Danish writer Thomasine Gyllembourg published her female adultery novel *Ægtestand* in 1835. These early novels were followed by several others of Continental *fin-de-siècle* women writers. The Norwegian/Danish writer Amalie Skram introduced female adultery in her novel *Constance Ring* (1885), as did her Swedish contemporary Victoria Benedictsson in *Fru Marianne* (1887), and the Danish/Norwegian Sigrid Undset in *Fru Marta Oulie* (1907). Hedwig Dohm's

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[3] Leskov's novella *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenks* formed the basis for an opera with the same title by Dmitri Shostakovich and Alexander Preis (libretto) (1934). Another opera which pivots on female adultery is Leoš Janáček's *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921), based on the play *The Storm* (1860) by the Russian author Alexander Ostrovksy.

[4] *Ved Vejen* was translated into English by Tiina Nunnally as *Katinka* (Seattle: Fjord Press, 1990). A more literal translation of the novel's title would be *Along the Tracks*.

[5] On the English translation of Van Eeden's novel, see note 20.

[6] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1977; London: The Women's Press, 1978) 154.

Sibilla Dalmar (1896) and Gabriele Reuter's *Ellen von der Weiden* (1901) are examples from German literature. Noteworthy examples from Dutch turn-of-the-century women's literature are *Hoogenoord* (1892), by Cornélie Huygens, and, of a later date, *Een Coquette Vrouw* by Carry van Bruggen, which was published in 1915. Many of these novels were almost entirely overlooked for a long time, as was most of the work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers. A renewal of interest in this surprisingly large group of writers since the 1970s has also brought to light the interest of women writers in the female adultery motif and has opened up the possibility of studying the use of the motif from a gendered perspective.

A type of novel which is closely related to the novel of female adultery is that which deals almost exclusively with the thoughts and emotions of the husband who suspects his wife of infidelity.[7] Examples are Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1868-1869), Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-1847), Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Kreuzer Sonata* (1891), Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (Brazil, 1900), and Marcellus Emants's *Een Nagelaten Bekentenis* [*A Posthumous Confession*] (The Netherlands, 1894).[8] The novel of female adultery and the novel of the deceived husband, however, differ so fundamentally, that I consider the deceived husband a separate literary motif, which, although closely linked to the female adultery motif, has its own literary dynamics. This will also become clear when, in chapter 2, I discuss the many short stories which deal with the jealousy of the adulteress's husband.

Many of the novels in which female adultery plays a central role aroused considerable upheaval in their respective countries of origin. After the publication of *Madame Bovary* in *La Revue de Paris* in 1856, a case was brought against its author and the magazine in which it was published for offending public morals and religion. The accused were acquitted, and the novel became a *succès de scandale* as a result of the trial.[9] The publication of Eça de Queirós's *O Primo Basílio* in 1878 also caused great controversy. The author was accused of plagiarizing Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and the novel was severely criticized on account of the descriptions of adulterous sexual pleasure, which, according to one of its critics, the Brazilian novelist Machado

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[7] Alison Sinclair's *The Deceived Husband: A Kleinian Approach to the Literature of Infidelity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) approaches the female adultery novel from the perspective of the deceived husband. Sinclair distinguishes three groups: the cuckolds, who mainly appear as figures of ridicule in medieval literature; the men of honour, who are proud, vigilant and action-prone and who are especially to be found in the Spanish theatre of the Golden Age, but also of course in Shakespeare's *Othello*; and the deceived husbands of the nineteenth-century novels, who may remain rather unsubstantial figures, but who may also receive their fair share of attention when it comes to the analysis of their reactions and emotions, or who may even be put at the centre of the narrative (Sinclair, 24).

[8] Emants's novel was translated into English by J.M. Coetzee (Boston: Twayne, 1976; London: Quartet, 1986).

[9] Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca, NY, [etc.]: Cornell University Press, 1982) 17-29.

de Assis, gave the novel a "boudoir aroma" (Amann, 65-66).[10] Interestingly, Machado de Assis himself became a significant contributor to female adultery fiction with his novel *Dom Casmurro* and a number of short stories.

The most important objection to these novels was generally the reference to or depiction of (female) sexuality. The Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden was very disappointed by the response to his novel *Van de Koele Meren des Doods*, which was criticized for its emphasis on the psychiatric condition of the heroine, whom a contemporary critic found "in haar zinnelijkheid bovendien meer een dier dan een vrouw" [sensually, moreover, more like an animal than a woman].[11] And the Norwegian paper *Dagsposten* objected to Amalia Skram's *Constance Ring* because the novel was "eneste stor Overdrivelse," presenting "som om hele Kristiania skulde vaere et eneste Horehus" [one big exaggeration [. . .] as if all Kristiania were one whorehouse].[12] Not all female adultery novels met with the same amount of opposition. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was greeted with enthusiasm by the readers of *The Russian Herald*, in which the novel was serialized, probably largely because "traditional virtues of domestic life were being vindicated and adultery [was] punished."[13] On account of its subject matter, the German writer Theodor Fontane had difficulty in finding a publisher for his *L'Adultera*. The book was received well, however, although it was not so big a success as his second novel of female adultery, *Effi Briest*, which met with general critical acclaim.[14] As these examples reveal, the reception of female adultery novels across Europe was mixed, and it is a misconception that female adultery as a literary topic was fully accepted across Continental Europe and that the Anglo-American world was unique in its lack of enthusiasm for its fictional representation.

All the same, there is general agreement among literary critics on the fact that English authors of the Victorian period did not take up the theme of female adultery in the way that writers on the Continent did. Bill Overton points out that during the Restoration period and the early eighteenth century there was a tradition of adultery novels in Britain, dominated by women writers such as Aphra Behn, who "questioned the double standard of sexual morality and asserted women's entitlement not only to a degree of personal independence but to sexual pleasure" (Overton 2002, 17). The tradition was extinguished from around 1740, although the end of the eighteenth century witnessed a brief revival, with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of*

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[10] Amann cites Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, "Eça de Queirós: *O primo Basílio*;" reprinted in Alberto Machado de Rosa, *Eça, discípulo de Machado?: Formação de Eça de Queirós (1875-1880)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editôra Fundo de Cultura, 1963) 137-138.

[11] J.H.A. Fontijn, *Tweespalt: Het Leven van Frederik van Eeden tot 1901* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1990) 447-448. Fontijn cites a review by Anna de Savornin Lohman, dated May 1901, published in *Over boeken en schrijvers* (Amsterdam; no publisher given; no year of publication given).

[12] Irene Engelstad, *Sammenbrudd og gjennombrudd: Amalie Skrams romaner om ekteskap og sinnssykdom* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1984) 49. Engelstad cites a review in *Dagsposten* of 25 June 1885.

[13] Anthony Thorlby, *Leo Tolstoy: Anna Karenina* (Cambridge, [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 106.

[14] Helen Chambers, *Theodor Fontanes Erzählwerk im Spiegel der Kritik: 120 Jahre Fontane-Rezeption* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003) 15, 20-21.

Woman (1798) as its possibly most well-known example (Overton 2002, 131-149). As the genre developed and moved into the nineteenth century, however, the focus shifted to subjects which were considered more appropriate, such as marriage and courtship.

Judith Armstrong suggests that adultery failed "to seize the English imagination," because young women in Victorian England were allowed a much larger degree of freedom in the choice of a husband, her assumption being that this freedom led to happier marriages and a decreased susceptibility to adultery (Armstrong, 30). It is doubtful whether this assumption is justified. More importantly, it seems that Victorian prudery made adultery virtually unmentionable, and novelists wisely avoided all too explicit reference to it or were advised to exercise self-restraint in the choice of subjects (Overton 1996, 6-9). Barbara Leckie explains that the "representation of adultery in [Victorian] England [. . .] was regulated by the critic's condemnation and explicit trials were accordingly unnecessary."[15] In 1862, a writer in *The Spectator* observed:

> Not one in twenty even of our most popular novelists could handle such topics graphically and dramatically, and yet not overstep the prescribed boundaries. Almost every one would hazard some expression or venture on some dangerous scene, which exclude his book from 'family' perusal, and thereby deprive it of saleability, and him of remuneration. We pay our writers to be moral, and they are moral.[16]

The censorship trial of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857 "provided a highly public and dramatic example of everything that the English hoped to avoid" (Leckie, 21). Whereas French novels were thought to be damaging to the moral fibre of especially the young and the female readers, and as such to the social structure of the entire nation, English writers were applauded for their reticence with regard to adultery and divorce.

Although there are some striking examples of Victorian novels by English writers in which female adultery plays a significant role, such as Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848), George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and, of a later date, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), female adultery did not play the central role that it did in Continental novels. English women writers shied away from using the motif more than their male contemporaries, because their work tended to come under greater scrutiny than that of their male colleagues. Moers claims that "George Eliot [. . .] hardly wrote a fiction that was not an adultery novel," but that she did everything to prevent "offending English proprieties or hurting [her] reputation as a moralist" (Moers, 154). Even though Dorothea Brooke's relationship with Will Ladislaw, for example, forms

[15] Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: the Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 20.
[16] "La Griffe Rose," *The Spectator* (13 September 1862) 1092; cited by Leckie, 25.

one of the most important story lines in *Middlemarch* (1871/1872), this does not make female adultery the central concern of Eliot's novel.

The influence of Victorian literature on American print culture was considerable. American magazines, which were the main outlets for fiction and poetry in the nineteenth century, often filled their pages with reprints from British magazines. The absence, until 1891, of an international copyright law made it easier and cheaper for American publishers to print existing work, which they could obtain for nothing and of which they knew whether it had appealed to the reading public, than to take a chance with an unknown American writer.[17] Many novels by English authors were therefore as well known and popular in America as they were in their country of origin, and English literature and literary taste were of great influence on the reading practices in America. The repressive attitude towards sexually related subjects which characterized Victorian literature, moreover, also dominated American literature. The representation of female adultery in American fiction was therefore equally rare.

In "The Editor's Study" of the June 1889 instalment of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the influential literary critic and fiction writer William Dean Howells addresses "the question of how much or how little the American novel ought to deal with certain facts of life which are not usually talked of before young people, and especially young ladies."[18] Howells defends the American literary practice of avoiding all too explicit reference to "the passion of guilty love" (Howells, 153), by stressing the adverse effect this would have on young, female readers, which was an often heard objection against the introduction of sexually related topics in literature. He argues: "[T]he novel in our civilization now always addresses a mixed company, and [. . .] the vast majority of the company are ladies, and [. . .] very many, if not most, of these ladies are young girls. If the novel were written for men and for married women alone, as in continental Europe, it might be altogether different" (Howells, 150). Howells's premise that on the European Continent 'dangerous' books could successfully be kept out of the hands of girls and young women is not borne out by sources on nineteenth-century reading practices.[19] However, his advice to avoid immoral subject matter to protect the innocence of young women readers reflects the views on what constituted appropriate reading in Victorian England and America (Levine, 23-24).[20] Howells admits that "[n]o one will

[17] Edward E. Chielens, ed., *American Literary Magazines: the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Westport, CT, [etc.]: Greenwood Press, 1986) 145.

[18] William Dean Howells, "The Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (June 1889): 151; reprinted in Edwin H. Cady, *W.D. Howells as Critic* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) 149. Subsequent citations refer to this book.

[19] See for example: Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1993; Oxford, [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 2002) 209-218; Renate Möhrmann, "The Reading Habits of Women in the *Vormärz*," *German Women in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History*, ed. John C. Fout (New York and London: Holmes & Meyer Publishers, 1984) 109-112; Martyn Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001) 86, 108, 110, 113, 121.

[20] The Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden hoped to find an American publisher for his novel *Van de Koele Meren des Doods* and offered it to the Chicago-based publishers Davis and Company.

pretend that there is not vicious love beneath the surface of our society" (Howells, 151). He acknowledges that novels with "a guilty love intrigue" (Howells, 151) enjoy great popularity, but he denounces their authors for relying on "rather cheap effects" (Howells, 151). Such subject matter has no place in the American novel, because it does no justice to reality. "The manners of the novel have been improving with those of its readers," Howells claims.

> It is quite false or quite mistaken to suppose that our novels have left untouched these most important realities of life. They have only not made them their stock in trade; they have kept a true perspective in regard to them; they have relegated them in their pictures of life to the space and place they occupy in life itself, as we know it in England and America. (Howells, 153).

Whether or not Howells's confidence in the moral stamina of nineteenth-century Americans was justified, his work as a literary critic and newspaper editor was of considerable influence. Howell's conservative stance on this point was not extreme in a period and literary climate from which, as I pointed out in my introduction, America's first vice societies and anti-pornography laws date.

According to Judith Armstrong, "there is before James scarcely a novel to be found [in American literature] dealing with the theme of adultery in the nineteenth century" (Armstrong, 35). Despite the major role that adultery plays in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), it is not a typical female adultery novel, but rather one "of post-adultery, half historical, half allegorical, and dealing with spiritual crime and punishment" (Overton 1996, 9). Henry James introduced female adultery in a number of his 'tales' and novels, most explicitly in his last novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1901), which Donald J. Greiner calls "*the* American novel of adultery."[21] However, James occupies a highly precarious position between American and European literature, both as a result of his frequent sojourns in Europe and his eventual decision to move to England and of the pivotal role that Europe plays in his fiction. Jessica Levine, as I pointed out in the introduction, argues that James's "bicontinental cultural position" (Levine, xi) strongly influenced his use of the female adultery motif, as it did Edith Wharton's. Wharton introduced female adultery in a number of her novels, such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Mother's Recompense*

Davis had in principle agreed to publish the book under the title *The Deeps of Deliverance*; the Dutch title – which literally translates as *Of the Cool Lakes of Death* – was considered unacceptable, because it had the word 'death' in it. After Davis had read the novel, he decided against publication, because "the morbidness and sensuality of Hedwig [the novel's female protagonist] delineated with such detail, would depress or influence for evil – by the principle of conscious or inconscious imitation – the happy-minded, pure-hearted American girl or young woman." (Fontijn, 447; Fontijn cites a letter from Davis and Company to Frederik van Eeden, dated 4 September 1901).

[21] Donald J. Greiner, *Adultery in the American Novel: Updike, James, and Hawthorne* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1985) 8. Greiner's italics.

(1925), and her last unfinished novel *The Buccaneers* (1938). In none of Wharton's novels, however, does female adultery play a central role.

Levine suggests that it was part of both James's and Wharton's literary strategy in dealing with illicit love, particularly in their early works, to introduce sexually active characters as part of the novel's background and to consign illicit love situations to the subplot (Levine, 3). According to Levine, "Edith Wharton at the beginning of her career placed potentially offensive material firmly in the background" (Levine, 6). The adulterous affairs of Bertha Dorset in Wharton's first novel about New York society, *The House of Mirth*, are only alluded to, even though they play an important role in the development of the main plot about the novel's protagonist, Lily Bart. Levine's study focuses on the way in which James and Wharton, when they introduced illicit love in their novels, used "[d]iscretion, in the sense of a reserve of expression" (Levine, xi), as "a productive constraint that was both culturally produced and freely chosen for its moral and aesthetic merits" (Levine, xii). James and Wharton refrained from using female adultery in the way that their Continental European contemporaries did, in order not to offend their readers and their publishers, but "not without drawing stylistic advantage from the limitations placed upon them by the market" (Levine, xii). Discretion became for them "an aesthetic response to the process of self-censorship" (Levine, xiii). In this way, Levine claims, these two authors found a way of addressing a subject which they knew was out of bounds.

The first novel by an American writer that used the female adultery motif in a way similar to her European contemporaries is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which appeared in 1899. As such it holds a unique place in American literature and, according to Marcus Cunliffe, "seems to belong more to the spirit of *fin-de-siècle* Europe than to the moralistic prescriptions of literature in the United States."[22] Since its rediscovery in the 1970s, the book has achieved canonical status, but the reviews that appeared upon its publication were predominantly negative. Chopin was criticized vehemently for writing a novel about so improper a subject. One of Chopin's harshest critics, Willa Cather, writing under the pen name 'Silbert,' called *The Awakening* "a Creole Bovary," drawing an analogy between Flaubert's and Chopin's novel.[23] Years later, Cather created her own female adulteress in *A Lost Lady* (1923). Cather's novel is not a typical female adultery novel, however, for the transgressive affair of the book's female protagonist takes place off-stage and is not pivotal to the plot.

[22] Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (1954; London, [etc.]: Penguin, 1986) 302.
[23] 'Silbert' [Willa Cather], the Pittsburgh *Leader* (8 July 1899); reprinted in Margaret Culley, ed., *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976).

1.2. The social context of the novel of female adultery

The interest of nineteenth-century authors in female adultery is often considered a mode of reflecting on the position of women in contemporary society, the role of marriage, the role of the woman in that marriage, the legal (im)possibilities of obtaining a divorce, and the controversial social status of the adulteress and/or divorcee.[24] Although the legal, social and religious attitudes towards marriage in the nineteenth century were not uniform across the Western world, there are significant similarities. In these societies, "marriage is linked very closely to the transmission of property, to the idea of the family, and to the role of motherhood" (Overton 1996, 4). Marriage in the nineteenth century may no longer have been a purely mercenary affair, but the role of wealth and property was considerable. Judith Armstrong points out that "[t]he higher the social status of the family the more clearly the marriage was seen to be an institution designed for the benefit of the families rather than the individuals concerned, and the settling of money and property via a legal contract to be of crucial importance" (Armstrong, 13). Armstrong refers here specifically to the French situation, but it may be taken to apply to nineteenth-century bourgeois and aristocratic marriages across Europe. Marriages were often arranged by the parents, and especially daughters had little influence on their parents' choice. Even where arranged marriages were a less common practice and where children had relative freedom to choose their partners, as appears to have been the case in Victorian England, it was thought that children should not marry without their parents' consent, and going against parental wishes could lead to rejection or disinheritance. Since the continuation or improvement of the family status was influenced by or even depended upon whether the children made 'good' marriages, the social and economic situation of the marriage candidate was extremely important. The situation in America was not radically different from that in the 'old world.' If, in Europe, marriage was important to consolidate family-held property, in America marriage was considered an economic duty, "since a wife was a positive essential both as a domestic co-worker and as a breeder of a new generation" (Armstrong, 31).

For nineteenth-century middle-class women, entering the marital state meant that she became part of her husband's property and was considered his possession. Marriage brought with it a number of legal restrictions: the wife was generally not allowed to have any property of her own, she was not allowed to occupy paid positions outside the house, and she could not be a partner in a contract of any kind, except, paradoxically, the marriage contract. Apart from legal restrictions, married life also brought with it social limitations.

[24] For my information on the social situation which motivated the use of the motif in literature I am indebted to the various studies on the female adultery novel, which provide a wealth of information on the subject. Other important studies are: Peter Gay, *Education of the Senses*, Vol. I of *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (1984; New York, [etc.]: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), and A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (2002; London: Arrow Books, 2003). Of particular interest to the situation in America is Hendrik Hartog, *Man & Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, MA, [etc.]: Harvard University Press, 2000).

The nineteenth-century bourgeois wife was largely confined to her husband's house, her home. Her occupations consisted mainly of running the household, although she was not generally expected to do much of the housework herself, and of maintaining social relations with women in similar positions (Wilson, 248, 305-308, 318; Hartog, 93-136). Much of her time would be devoted to the bearing and raising of children. Since contraception was not widely available or used, becoming a mother was in most cases an inevitable consequence of the marital state (Gay, 243-277). The bourgeois wife, then, combined many roles: "[t]he figure of the wife ideally contains the biological *female*, the obedient *daughter* (and perhaps sister), the faithful *mate*, the responsible *mother*, and the believing *Christian*, and harmonizes all the patterns that bestow upon her these differing identities" (Tanner, 17; Tanner's italics). Marriage in the nineteenth century was moreover often literally 'till death us do part,' for in most countries divorce only became a legal possibility towards the end of the century (Armstrong, 13-14, 28, 34-35; Hartog, 70-76; Wilson, 234). However, this did not mean that divorce was in all cases considered socially acceptable.

The generally accepted view of marriage in the nineteenth century as the most desirable state that a woman could wish for, providing her with the opportunity to fulfil her biological role of wife and mother, of caretaker and nurturer, safely tucked away in the bosom of the family and emotionally and economically dependent on the husband, remained the dominant view until well into the twentieth century, although from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, it came under attack from feminists and utopian socialists, who pleaded for female independence and the possibility of personal fulfilment through means other than those provided by marriage. Within the traditional nineteenth-century context, adultery, and especially female adultery, was almost always considered as dangerous and threatening, either to the individual or to society, but usually to both.

Since adultery undermined one of the foundations of patriarchal society, the 'holy state of matrimony,' it was thought to undermine society itself. In the general debate on marriage and on the place of women in marriage and in society, the writers of the period often questioned the traditional points of view and in so doing often reverted to the female adultery motif. In the representation of female adultery most writers refrained from expressing outright condemnation of the adulterous act and the adulteress, but also from expressing endorsement, although, by emphasizing the circumstances that led to the adulterous act, a degree of understanding for the transgressing woman was created. As D.A. Williams says:

> Adultery of the wife exerted a strong fascination upon writers of the period, eliciting a variety of responses, ranging from firm condemnation to surreptitious expressions of sympathy, sometimes both within the same text. There is often an unresolved contradiction between a deeply entrenched sense of the catastrophic nature and

> consequences of adultery and a strong and at times uncontrolled urge to endorse the adulterous woman's bid for personal fulfilment. This contradiction produces highly erratic ideological readings, as novelists, not knowing whether to condemn or to condone, oscillate wildly between different value-systems and perspectives. The ideological viewpoint of the author is not always clearly presented.[25]

Williams refers in his article to French literature, but his observation on the ambivalent attitude of nineteenth-century writers towards female adultery may also be said to apply to writers of other nationalities. However, it seems that as the role of women in society changed, writers felt less inclined to express extreme opinions on the subject, to display, as Williams calls it, a tendency to "oscillate wildly" between condemnation and endorsement of adultery. Instead they withdrew behind a facade of ostensible neutrality, inviting readers to determine their own position in this public debate.

1.3. Female adultery in sensation literature

In spite of or alongside the efforts to censor or regulate the representations of adultery in literature, nineteenth-century English and American print culture also featured its uninhibited treatment. David S. Reynolds draws attention to the fact that America's nineteenth-century society and culture, which seemed dominated by prudery, moral uprightness and domesticity, was, in fact, "a heterogeneous culture which had strong elements of the criminal, the erotic, and the demonic."[26] The improvements in printing and distribution technology led to a large-scale writing and publishing industry which focused on popular taste. Reynolds argues that "[a]lthough the hunger for sensationalism has been visible in all societies and periods, early nineteenth-century America was unique, since for the first time this hunger could be fed easily on a mass scale. The right to freedom of the press made possible journalistic reportage of shocking stories that were censored in more repressive societies" (Reynolds, 169). The lively interest in erotic writings was catered to by writers like George Thompson, publishing in the 1840s and 1850s, in whose novels every type of illicit sex was suggested and more often portrayed graphically.[27] Thompson's heroines are often tied to frigid, older men, but they indulge in outrageous fantasies of infidelity. One of Thompson's adulteresses is heard to declare: "'Tis slavery, 'tis madness, to be chained for life to but one source of love, when a

[25] D.A. Williams, "Partriachal Ideology and French Fictions of Adultery 1830-1857," in Nicholas White and Naomi Segal, eds., *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 139.
[26] David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, [etc.], 1988) 169.
[27] Reynolds, 219. See also Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Basic Books, 1967) for similar trends in Victorian Britain.

thousand streams would not satiate or overflow." Another woman with an uninterested husband asks: "How long must I remain here pining for the embraces of fifty men, and enduring the impotent caresses of but one?"[28] The work of writers like George Thompson was published as yellow-covered pamphlet novels, which were tremendously popular (Reynolds, 209-210). They were, however, not likely to find their way to the average family drawing-room and therefore presented less of a threat to the moral fibre of women than the sensation novel, which erupted onto the literary scene in the 1860s.

Lyn Pykett claims that the emergence of the sensation novel in Victorian Britain was rather unexpected: "Contemporary reviewers of the mid-Victorian literary scene described it as an entirely new form of fiction, which burst dramatically upon an unsuspecting but eager public."[29] What typified the sensation novel was its complicated plot, hinging on mystery and secrecy, often involving crime, arson, poison, bigamy, adultery, incest and other forms of unconventional sexual and relational behaviour, and its passionate, assertive, dangerous and sometimes deranged heroine. In fact, sensation literature was expected to be filled to the brim with scandalous adventures and "reveled in exposing the secretly immoral passions that burned beneath the surface of familiar respectability."[30] This new vogue in fiction enjoyed enormous popularity in both Britain and America, but also regularly evoked protest and outright condemnation.

The rather unexpected popularity of sensation fiction "figured as a disruption of the comparative calm of a middle-class fiction market dominated by domestic tales with a moralising bent" (Pykett 1992, 47). What critics found particularly worrying was that many of these 'fast' novels were about women, written by women writers, and devoured by mainly women readers. There were also successful male writers of sensation fiction, such as Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins, but their novels also tended to have a feminine perspective (Hughes, 30). This anomaly is indicative of the complex relationship between, on the one hand, the moral purity and uprightness that was expected of Victorian women, both as readers and as writers, and on the other hand, the literary tastes of a female readership who were fascinated by stories about women's lives filled with adventure and romance and a literary market which invited women writers to produce fiction that would appeal to popular taste. According to Lyn Pykett: "The contemporary reviewers' perception of sensation fiction as a feminine or feminised form exposes many of the contradictions of the gendered discourse on fiction. [. . .] One of the central paradoxes of the sensation debate was its tendency to define the sensation novel as a form which was both characteristically feminine, and profoundly unfeminine, or even

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[28] Reynolds, 219. Reynolds cites George Thompson, *Venus in Boston: A Romance of City Life* (New York: n.p., 1849) 40 and 25.

[29] Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 47. My other main source of information on English sensation novels by women writers is: Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[30] Laura Hanft Korobkin*, Criminal Conversations: Sentimentality and Nineteenth-Century Legal Stories of Adultery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 98.

anti-feminine" (Pykett 1992, 33). Both in subject matter and representation of the female protagonists, the women writers of sensation novels transgressed socially accepted norms, especially in its treatment of sexuality, and more in particular female sexuality.

The influential reviewer Margaret Oliphant, who was also a well-known novelist and short story writer, complained that sensation novels featured women who

> marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion; women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women, at the very least of it, who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream.[31]

She condemned both the women writers and readers of sensation novels:

> It is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them. Their patronage of such books is in reality an adoption and acceptance of them. It may be done in carelessness. It may be done in that mere desire for something startling which the monotony of ordinary life is apt to produce; but it is debasing to everybody concerned.[32]

Contemporary reviewers were not only shocked by the fact that women writers chose to create heroines who specialized in transgressive behaviour; they were worried that women readers, and more specifically young and impressionable women readers, would come to see these sensation novel heroines as role models, whose behaviour showed that it was possible to liberate oneself from the restrictions of patriarchal society.

The literary roots of sensation fiction can be traced back to the Gothic romance, the stage melodrama, and penny dreadfuls, but its sudden eruption onto the literary scene was "complexly interlinked with the development of sensational newspaper journalism, particularly with the vogue for lurid reporting of divorce cases" (Pykett 1992, 54; and see Hughes, 5-15). The vivid reports of these court cases in popular newspapers formed a fertile source of information for nineteenth-century writers of sensation fiction. Barbara Leckie and Laura Hanft Korobkin both elaborate on the interrelation of adultery in nineteenth-century divorce cases and its representation in literature and other forms of writing.

Barbara Leckie, who focuses on the print culture of Victorian England, argues that adultery, despite the attempts to censor its representation, at the

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[31] Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102 (1867): 259; cited in Flint, 275.

[32] Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102 (1867): 274-275; cited in Pykett 1992, 48.

same time caused "an extraordinary proliferation of discursive activity" (Leckie, 12). She reports on the passing of the divorce bill as part of the Matrimonial Causes Act in England, in 1857, which led to divorce trials and a new brand of journalism which specialized in providing the reading public with the intimate details of the private and sexual lives of men and women who wanted to end their marriages on the grounds of adultery (Leckie, 62-111). In fact, "the newspaper coverage of divorce cases would put adultery vividly in the public sphere in a manner that would make [. . .] French novels and obscene publications [. . .] look mild by comparison" (Leckie, 63). This type of journalism met with considerable criticism. In 1868, Queen Victoria herself spoke out against this development:

> The Queen wishes to ask the Lord Chancellor whether no steps can be taken to prevent the present publicity of the proceedings before the new Divorce Court. These cases, which must necessarily increase when the new law [the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act] becomes more and more known, fill now almost daily a large portion of the newspapers, and are of so scandalous a character that it makes it almost impossible for a paper to be trusted in the hands of a young lady or boy. None of the worst French novels from which careful parents would try to protect their children can be as bad as what is daily brought and laid upon the breakfast-table of every educated family in England, and its effect must be most pernicious to the public morals of the country. (Leckie, 93)[33]

In the interest of the freedom of speech, however, no restrictions were issued and the Victorians devoured the numerous sensational reports that filled the pages of the newspapers. Leckie contends that the representation of female adultery in British fiction was inspired by both the examples in French literature and domestic divorce court journalism. Writers of sensation literature catered to a growing craving for excitement and restlessness in the response to the repressive nature of Victorian society and attempted to satisfy the demands of their readers, without being overtly subversive, by staying within the limits of propriety and respecting the existing social values.

Laura Hanft Korobkin focuses on the intersection of the sentimental novel and American courtroom practices in divorce trials. Korobkin points out that in America the newspaper industry was equally interested in reporting on divorce cases as in Britain: "Complete trial transcripts were published daily in several New York newspapers, including the *New York Tribune* and *The New York Times*" (Korobkin, 195n10). She gives the example of the famous Beecher-Tilton case, in which the New York author and editor Theodore Tilton accused the nation's most famous preacher and national symbol of moral uprightness, Henry Ward Beecher, of having committed adultery with Tilton's own wife,

[33] Leckie cites Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1969) 220.

Elizabeth (Korobkin, 57-60). When the trial got underway, "every major newspaper in the country devoted front-page coverage to the case on a daily basis," and "[t]rial transcripts [. . .] were also sold to the public in booklet form as the trial continued" (Korobkin, 58). After the judge had dismissed the deadlocked jury and closed the trial without issuing a verdict, the media did not let the matter rest, but "delivered a variety of verdicts" (Korobkin, 59). A divorce case thus found its way into the contemporary print culture and was continued there beyond its official duration.

The Beecher-Tilton case is also remarkable for the reciprocal effect that literature, in the form of Charles Reade's sensation novel *Griffith Gaunt, or, Jealousy*, had on the trial. The novel relates the story of the devoutly Catholic Catherine Peyton, who marries the handsome, but weak and hard-drinking Griffith Gaunt, and then develops a passionate love for her priest. Catherine's love is reciprocated, although the affair is not consummated. The affair triggers a series of sensational events, which were known to appeal to the reading public (Korobkin, 98-99). Reade's novel was "a scandalous best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic" (Korobkin, 98),[34] and its plot was therefore widely known. In the case of Tilton versus Beecher, Theodore Tilton testified that his wife had confessed to him that she had had an affair with the clergyman Beecher. Tilton's testimony was supported by a letter from his wife to him in which she explained that she realized the sinfulness of her relationship with Beecher after she had read Reade's novel *Griffith Gaunt* and had drawn a parallel between her own life and that of the fictional character. The introduction of the letter as evidence gave the novel and the novel's female protagonist an unusual role in the trial, and "[t]he seemingly clear boundary lines between fact and fiction, letter and testimony, literary heroine and 'true defendant' were inevitably eroded" (Korobkin, 97). The novel was widely discussed during the trial and used by both parties to argue their case. The case provides a unique example of the reciprocal effect that sensation literature and its treatment of female adultery had on a nineteenth-century divorce case.

The questionable reputation of sensation literature, both in terms of its social impact and its critical appraisal, motivated some sensation novelists to moderate their plots. One of the more prolific contributors to the sensation literature industry was Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whose work enjoyed great popularity both in England and America in the 1860s. Braddon had already produced a number of extremely successful sensation novels, when she started on *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), for which she reworked the plot of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The novel was intended as a 'literary' novel, rather than a novel aimed at her usual audience, which could not get enough of her tales of intrigue, murder, and deception. Braddon, as Lyn Pykett points out, "aspired to more than merely popular and commercial success" and "wished to please discriminating critics rather than to scandalize them."[35] Braddon had

[34] In America, *Griffith Gaunt, or, Jealousy* was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 12 monthly instalments from December 1865 – November 1866.

[35] Lyn Pykett, Introduction, *The Doctor's Wife* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, ed. Lyn Pykett (1864; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) vii.

vented her admiration for *Madame Bovary*,[36] but she realized that adjustments to Flaubert's plot were necessary, if she wanted *The Doctor's Wife* to be judged upon its literary merits rather than its scandalous passages. The novel's heroine Isabel Gilbert is not allowed to succumb to the advances of her aristocratic lover, so that "[i]ronically Flaubert's novel [. . .] is in many ways more sensational than the queen of the English sensation novel's reworking of it" (Pykett 1998, xvi). The contemporary reviews of *The Doctor's Wife* indicate that Braddon's strategy was successful; they recognized that the novel's emphasis on character rather than plot represented a new way of writing for Braddon (Pykett 1998, xviii). Braddon's ambitions to be recognized as a writer of literary novels, instead of 'cheap' sensation novels, foreshadow the ambitions of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton with regard to their literary careers.

1.4. Conclusion

The survey of female adultery novels which I have given in the first section of this chapter is by no means exhaustive. More novels in which female adultery plays a more or less central role could be added. I have emphasized the contribution of women writers to this type of novel, which has been largely disregarded in the studies of this type of novel that have appeared so far. The cause for this remarkable oversight is no doubt partly due to the fact that much of the literary work by nineteenth-century women writers was largely overlooked until its large-scale rediscovery in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, some of these novels were written in less widely spoken languages and only occasionally translated, which has meant that they often remained unknown outside their countries of origin and have consequently not often been included in comparative studies.

By contrast, the contribution of women writers to nineteenth-century sensation literature has been studied widely. The emphasis in sensation literature on all kinds of transgressive sexual relationships and other forms of irregular behaviour has prompted discussions on the role of sensation literature in raising women's awareness of their position in society and on the significance of its predominantly female authorship. Literary critics agree, however, that the sensation novel was aimed at public rather than critical acclaim. The fact that this type of novel was largely produced by women writers has consequently reinforced the preconceived opinion that women were primarily motivated to write for financial reasons and that they only rarely were or even aspired to be 'major' writers.

The virtual absence of the female adultery motif in 'serious' British and American literature has been attributed to the repressive attitude in Britain and

[36] Pykett points out that Braddon was "an inveterate recycler of her own and other novelists' plots" and "frankly admitted her indebtedness to Flaubert's novel" (Pykett 1998, viii).

America with regard to controversial, and especially sexually related matters in literature. The examples that can be found are characterized by a less explicit treatment and veiled references, dictated by an acknowledged need for restraint and self-censorship. The work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton is evidence, however, that writers who aspired to be recognized as serious literary artists made an important contribution to the development of the motif in American literature. Their choice of genre, as I have argued in my introduction, formed an important aspect of their strategy to enable them to deal with such a controversial topic. Kate Chopin's decision to write *The Awakening* can be seen as a bold, if somewhat injudicious step. Edith Wharton's avoidance of female adultery as a central issue in her novels, what Jessica Levine refers to as her 'discretion,' proved to be an effective literary strategy. In terms of the development of the female adultery motif in American literature, however, the short stories of both writers are equally, if not more significant.

The novel of female adultery has been the subject of a number of literary studies, many of which I have already referred to above. Although each study takes a different approach, the focus is predominantly on the novels written by male authors in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the exploration of the topic reached its peak in narrative fiction. Collectively, these studies have contributed enormously to my knowledge about and my understanding of the literary tradition of female adultery in fiction. Their almost exclusive focus on the genre of the novel is remarkable and fails to take into account how the short story genre influenced the representation of female adultery in fiction and the way it contributed to the social debate on the role and position of women in turn-of-the-century society. By investigating the way in which female adultery was represented in short fiction of the period, I aim to offer a different perspective on the use of the motif in narrative literature.

Chapter 2

Brief affairs
Female adultery in short stories

The short story has inspired many literary critics to propose definitions of the genre and to discuss its characteristics, limitations and qualities. Susan Lohafer, however, concludes: "The question 'How do we define the short story?' is as old as the practice of short story criticism. Nobody seems to have answered it satisfactorily. That much we agree on."[1] I will therefore resist any temptation to analyse the general nature of the short story or to add yet another definition to those that have been proposed already. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the way in which the genre may have influenced the representation of female adultery in short stories of the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century and to show how the short stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton fit into an international tradition of short fiction on the transgressive love of married women.

In order to do so, it is relevant to acknowledge a surprisingly large body of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female adultery short stories by (predominantly) European writers who frequently addressed the topic in their work, either novelistic or dramatic: Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós, Arthur Schnitzler, Luigi Pirandello, Marcellus Emants, and Henry James. These writers belong to different Western cultures, but they have one important thing in common: they are all male. Just as the female adultery novels of male writers have drawn more attention than those written by their female contemporaries, so have, perhaps not surprisingly, their short stories on this topic. During the revival of interest in the work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers in the 1970s, more attention was generally paid to their novels than to their short stories, which, with a few exceptions, seems to be the general fate of short story work. However, a number of European nineteenth-century women writers, such as Gabrielle Reuter, Anne Charlotte Leffler, and George Egerton, also wrote short stories involving female adultery.[2] The stories of these women

[1] Susan Lohafer, Introduction to Part II, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, [etc.]: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 57.

[2] I have read the stories of Guy de Maupassant, Arthur Schnitzler, Gabrielle Reuter, Anne Charlotte Leffler, and Marcellus Emants in their original languages. Although English translations of the work of these authors exist, if not always of the stories which I cite, I have chosen to give my own translations. I have read the stories of Luigi Pirandello and Machado de Assis in a Dutch

writers are of special significance because they exemplify the introduction of the phenomenon of the 'New Woman' into the tradition.

Both Chopin and Wharton were well acquainted with contemporary European literature in general. In my introduction, I referred to the strong French influences in Kate Chopin's background and her appreciation of the work of Guy de Maupassant and to Edith Wharton's multilingual education and her wide reading in French, German, and Italian. Edith Wharton frequently acknowledged her admiration for Honoré de Balzac and her indebtedness to the work of her personal friend Henry James has been discussed extensively.[3] It is perhaps less well known that Wharton was also familiar with the work of Anton Chekhov and Arthur Schnitzler.[4] However, my argument is not that Chopin and Wharton may have been influenced directly or indirectly by one or more of their precursors or contemporaries, but rather that their short stories form part of an international tradition of employing the female adultery motif in short fiction.

The basic plot structure of the nineteenth-century novel of female adultery is, despite endless variations on the motif, remarkably similar and a binding element in the tradition of its use. The brevity of the short story, however, does not allow the comprehensive portrayal of the bourgeois wife who, as a result of dissatisfaction, boredom, or unfulfilled desires, cannot resist the charms of another man and starts, or is at least tempted to start, an adulterous affair, which in most fictional cases leads to the adulteress's social and psychological ruin, and often to her death. Instead, the short story form invited writers to focus on a specific aspect of the adulterous affair. I will argue that turn-of-the-century short stories on female adultery tend to focus on the

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translation. The translations into English are my own. I am aware that in translating a text which is itself a translation, one is in danger of not representing the original entirely correctly. In view of the function of the citations in this study, I consider this an acceptable risk. In the case of Anton Chekhov's stories, I have used the translation by Constance Garnett, unless otherwise indicated. For Eça de Queirós's "The Yellow Sofa" I have used the translation by John Vetch.

[3] Throughout her book *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton refers to the work of Honoré de Balzac as one of the most noteworthy European writers. For the relationship between Edith Wharton and Henry James see, for example: BG, 169-196; Lee, 212-232; and Millicent Bell, *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of their Friendship* (New York: Peter Olsen, 1965).

[4] Most of the information on Wharton's familiarity with the work of Schnitzler and Chekhov comes from her letters. Richard Lawson quotes the letter in which Wharton advises her friend Sara Norton to read "a little three act play by Arthur Schnitzler, 'Liebelei' – a singularly poignant thing" (Richard H. Lawson, *Edith Wharton and German Literature* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1974) 46, 129). Helen Killoran has found indications that Wharton also read Schnitzler's "Frau Berta Garlan," *Lebendige Stunden*, and *Der Weg ins Freie* (Helen Killoran, "Edith Wharton's Reading in European Languages and Its Influence on her Work," *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe,* eds. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 377).

In a letter, dated 7 October 1922, to William Gerhardie, who was the first critic to publish a book in English on Chekhov, Edith Wharton commented: "I know Tchekov, yes, & am delighted that you're to write about him too. – I haven't read him from end to end, because I can't bear more than a few pages at a time of that English-of-all-work in which the hapless foreigner is always offered to us, & I'm hoping for a better German translation. Is there one? What I've read I've admired (some of it) greatly; but I won't qualify or discriminate because that wd lead me into a long talk on the art of the short story. I'd much rather wait confidently for what you have to say" (LEW, 458).

same aspects, which makes it possible to categorize these stories on the basis of their pivotal concern.

2.1. Perspectives on female adultery

On the basis of my analysis of a substantial corpus of turn-of-the-century short stories on female adultery, I contend that there is a significant consistence in the way the topic is treated in this genre. Writers generally chose to focus on the same five aspects of the adulterous affair, which I have labelled: desire, transgression, retribution, jealousy, and liberation. One of these aspects generally forms the central concern of a female adultery short story, influencing the way in which the topic is approached and the issues which are addressed. This categorization of female adultery short stories is not in itself essential, nor is it important to fix individual stories in one specific category, rather than another. In fact, in many cases it could be argued that a particular story could be placed in more than one category. However, I have found that my categorization, on which I will elaborate in the following sections, provides a useful framework for the comparison of short stories which deal with the transgressive affairs of wives.

A large number of female adultery stories focus on the wife's motivation to commit or contemplate adultery. I have grouped these stories in the category labelled 'desire,' which I have chosen as an umbrella term for a variety of motivations of the adulteress. The emphasis in these stories is often on the psychology of the female protagonist. In some instances, the adulterous act never takes place, except in the imagination of the tempted wife. The stories in the category that I have labelled 'transgression' predominantly relate a particular sequence of events, leading up to or including the adultery. The 'retribution' stories deal with the events that almost invariably follow the transgression. These stories highlight the period following the adultery of the female protagonist and consequently deal with issues such as divorce and the social status of the divorcee. The category labelled 'jealousy' contains stories which concentrate on a man, usually the husband, who, rightly or wrongly, suspects a woman, usually his wife, of adultery. These stories examine the man's thoughts and emotions, as he faces the possible infidelity of his wife, who does sometimes not even appear in person, although she is very much present. The stories in the final category, labelled 'liberation,' focus on female adultery as part of the female protagonist's process of liberation from the constraints of her marriage and her social position. Although they may to some extent resemble the 'desire' stories, the 'liberation' stories differ in that they introduce a new dimension to the motif, the rise of the 'New Woman' and of feminism.

2.1.1. Desire

The stories in the category labelled 'desire' focus on the wife's inclination to or motivation for adultery. The transgressive wives in female adultery stories have a variety of motives to start an adulterous affair, for example to take revenge on or out of spite towards the husband, to relieve boredom, or out of curiosity. In these cases, the wife is seen as an agent in the affair.[5] The adulterous inclination may also be linked explicitly to the wife's sexual desire, and as such, these stories are the literary evidence of a changing attitude in nineteenth-century society towards female sexuality. The nineteenth-century repressive attitude towards sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular is well known (Gay, 133-168). Women were not believed and certainly not supposed to have sexual feelings, and female sexuality was not a topic which could be discussed or written about openly. Sexuality was generally depicted, if only in extremely veiled terms, as something which women were supposed to accept as an inescapable part of married life, aimed at procreation or the sexual gratification of men. Although, from the early 1820s onwards, numerous medical publications on sexuality started to appear, many of these studies were "dictated more by unexamined preconceptions and unconscious fears than by medical observations" (Gay, 164). In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the emergence of the theories of Sigmund Freud and others led to a gradual awakening of society to female sexuality. Of particular importance was Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* [*The Interpretation of Dreams*], which was published in 1900. The increasing general knowledge of both the physical and psychological aspects of female sexuality no doubt influenced its treatment in literature. At the same time, literature fulfilled a role in the dissemination of carnal knowledge, even if the representation of sexuality, by today's standards, was oblique (Flint, 214-216; Gay, 329-330).

In depicting married women whose adultery was linked to the emergence of their sexual awareness, writers implicitly, or sometimes even explicitly, commented on the role of sexuality in marriage and the unsatisfactory sexual relations between the spouses. As such, as Alison Sinclair observes, female adultery literature "carries a powerful subtext that unconsciously undermines patriarchy – a subtext of the failure of masculinity" (Sinclair, 16). In fact, Sinclair adds:

> One might well ask what patriarchy thinks it is doing if it produced all these examples of its own failure. Is it merely seeking to instil

[5] Lorraine Nye Gaudefroy-Demombynes identifies various reasons for female adultery in Maupassant's work. She distinguishes between female characters who are unfaithful as a result of their husband's character and/or behaviour and those who commit adultery for a variety of reasons of their own. She distinguishes seven reasons: (1) love for the other man, (2) boredom, (3) vanity, (4) curiosity, (5) lust or sensuality, (6) money, or (7) perfidiousness. Lorraine Nye Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Femme dans l'Oeuvre de Maupassant* (Paris: Université de Paris, 1943) 32-71. Although based on the analysis of Maupassant's work, this categorization can also be applied to female characters of other writers, although most of them did not create such a wide variety of adulteresses.

> fear in others by ridiculing those whose wives are found to be unfaithful, or might it despite itself, in some sort of gargantuan Freudian slip, be revealing underlying truths about its own nature? (Sinclair, 17)

The fact that women would be prepared to endanger their respectability and social position in order to satisfy their sexual needs will have come as a particularly sensitive blow to patriarchal society. Not only were wives shown to harbour desires that they were not supposed to have, let alone acknowledge, husbands were suggested to be deficient in their inability to satisfy their wives sexually.

Guy de Maupassant, whose short story work abounds with adultery, portrays a large variety of women who are sexually assertive and fully aware of their sexual needs. Some of his heroines appear to be motivated solely by lust and are presented as sexual predators. The narrator of "La Bûche" [The Log] (1882), for example, is shocked and indignant at the libidinous behaviour of his friend's wife, when she forces her attentions on him.[6] The ageing husband in "Un Sage" [A Wise Man] (1883), on the other hand, has resigned himself to the fact that the insatiable sexual needs of his young wife physically exhaust him, and he allows her to entertain lovers at home. Other Maupassant adulteresses, such as the nameless female protagonist of "Une Aventure Parisienne" [A Parisian Adventure] (1881), are essentially guileless and even disarming.[7] In this short story, a young wife leaves her home in the countryside to experience the attractions of the big city. She meets a famous writer and allows him to seduce her, but she returns home disillusioned. "[R]ougissante comme une vierge," she admits to her husband: "J'ai voulu connaître... le... le vice... eh bien... eh bien, ce n'est pas drôle"[8] [Blushing like a virgin [. . .] I wanted to find out about... vice... and well... it's no fun].

In some stories, the adulterous behaviour of Maupassant's heroines is induced by spitefulness or simply boredom. In "La Confidence" [The Confession] (1885), a young marchioness confesses to her friend the baroness that she is repulsed by her husband and his physical attentions. Angry about his unwarranted jealousy, she throws herself out of spite into the arms of another man. And in "Joseph" [Joseph] (1885), two aristocratic and inebriated young ladies tell each other how they seduce men to keep themselves amused while their husbands are away from home. And it is not only husbands, but also lovers that become the victims of the unchecked sexual desires of women. In "Le Rendez-vous" [The Rendez-vous] (1889), Madame Haggan is on her way to meet her lover. She is not looking forward to it, though, because she has become bored with him and their affair. A chance meeting with another

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[6] I will discuss this short story in more detail in chapter 4, in relation to Kate Chopin's "The Kiss."

[7] This point was also made by Mary Donaldson-Evans in *A Woman's Revenge: The Chronology of Dispossession in Maupassant's Fiction* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1986).

[8] Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et Nouvelles*, eds. Albert-Marie Schmidt and Gérard Delaisement, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1967). This citation, vol. 1, p. 767.

attractive acquaintance instigates her to cancel her appointment and spend the afternoon with a new suitor. Guy de Maupassant is sometimes accused of hostility, even misogyny, in his portrayal of the female sex, as in stories like "La Confidence" and "Joseph." The setting of these stories in the world of the aristocracy is significant, however. Stories like these are also a critique of the behaviour of members of a certain class, rather than just a misogynist attack on sexually aggressive women. Maupassant moreover also wrote several short stories in which adulterous women are depicted with great sympathy. Although his negative depiction of women may have attracted more attention, his representation of the female sex is in fact highly diverse.

In Anton Chekhov's short stories, we find an equally varied range of female motives for and attitudes toward adultery, although the wives he depicts are rarely as calculating and callous as those of his French contemporary. The young woman in "The Chemist's Wife" (1886) feels "bored, depressed, vexed."[9] While her unromantic husband, a qualified dispenser, is dreaming of success in business, she flirts with a young officer who comes into the chemist's shop after hours. But her amorous adventures are nipped in the bud, like those of the wife of sexton Savély Gykin in "The Witch" (1886). The superstitious husband in this story accuses his wife Raïssa of using supernatural powers to lure men to their house: "I only know that when your blood's on fire there's sure to be bad weather, and when there's bad weather there's bound to be some crazy fellow turning up here. It happens so every time! So it must be you!"[10] Raïssa is disgusted by her middle-aged husband and cannot keep her eyes off the young postman who shelters by her fire one stormy night. Her attempts to make the young man stay, however, are frustrated by her jealous husband.

In "A Misfortune" (1886), the passion of the married Sofya Petrovna for the young lawyer Ilyin has far more serious consequences. Sofya Petrovna is introduced as the chaste and morally irreproachable wife of notary Lubyantsev, who virtuously tries to fend off Ilyin's persistent attentions. But she is overwhelmed by her feelings of passionate desire and by the sensation of power over her suitor. He pleads her to go away with him and she wrestles with the idea. "She was breathless, hot with shame, did not feel her legs under her, but what drove her on was stronger than shame, reason, or fear."[11] The story ends here, but we must infer that Sofya gives in to Ilyin's seductive pleas. It provides an excellent example of the open ending which is so characteristic for the short story genre. Will Sofya actually run away with Ilyin and find happiness? Or will the momentary satisfaction of an adulterous affair lead to a life in exile and misery? Or will she retrace her steps and return to her husband? All this falls outside the story world. Chekhov leaves his heroine

[9] Anton Chekhov, "The Chemist's Wife," 201 Stories by Anton Chekhov, trans. and ed. Constance Garnett, 29 February 2008 <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/jr/067.htm>.
[10] Anton Chekhov, "The Witch," 201 Stories by Anton Chekhov, trans. and ed. Constance Garnett, 29 February 2008 <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/jr/051.htm>.
[11] Anton Chekhov, "A Misfortune," 201 Stories by Anton Chekhov, trans. and ed. Constance Garnett, 29 February 2008 <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/jr/073.htm>.

caught between her feelings of desire and of shame, but refrains from depicting how the relationship between Sofya and Ilyin will develop, offering the reader the chance to construct his/her own preferred resolution. The moral judgement is thus also transferred from the writer to the reader, who may choose to either support or reprehend the adulteress. An open ending such as this releases the writer from explicating his or her ideological stand, although the writer's use of point of view techniques can be taken as a clue, as I will show in the chapters on the work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton.

Even though the adulterous passion remains a mere fantasy, as it does in several stories, it can be very disruptive and disturbing. The main character of Guy de Maupassant's "Réveil" [Awakening] (1883), the young Jeanne, has married a much older man. She is advised by her doctor to spend the winter in Paris, where she enjoys the attention of several young men. She starts having sexual fantasies about one of them, which is a novel experience for the innocent young wife. When one of her admirers tries to take advantage of the situation, the reality of an adulterous affair proves to be more than she can cope with and she hurries home to her husband. The experience of Henriette, the female protagonist of "Clair de Lune" [Moonlight] (1882), is more romantic. Upon her return from a holiday abroad with her rather dull husband, she confesses to her sister that she was seduced in the moonlight by another man. Her sister concludes: "Vois-tu, grande soeur, bien souvent, ce n'est pas un homme que nous aimons, mais l'amour. Et ce soir-là, c'est le clair de lune qui fut ton amant vrai" (Maupassant 1, 808) [You see, sister, often it is not a man that we love, but love itself. And that night, it was the moonlight that was your real lover].

The fact that the adulterous desire only occurs in a dream or fantasy, as is the case in several short stories, does not make it less threatening for the husband. Whereas an adulterous wife can be penalized for her actual transgressive acts, her romantic dreams and sexual fantasies are intangible. Although according to the Bible having adulterous desires was as wrong as actually committing adultery, a wife who was breaking her marital vows only in her imagination could not be disciplined.[12] Arthur Schnitzler's novella *Traumnovelle* [Dream Story] (1925) is probably one of the most famous examples in fiction in which adulterous fantasies play a central role. In its use of dreams as indicators of subconscious desires and fears, it is one of the most explicit representations of Freud's theories on the significance of dreams. This novella focuses primarily on the husband's nightly escapades through Vienna, during which he is introduced to a mysterious, masked world of sex and violence, but is also confronted with the harsh reality of the world of prostitution. In the meantime, his wife has a rather disturbing dream in which she allows herself to be seduced by a stranger:

[12] Matthew 5:27-28; 27: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery." 28: "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

> Es war immer derselbe und immer ein anderer, jedesmal grüßte er, wenn er an mir vorüberkam, endlich aber blieb er vor mir stehen, sah mich prüfend an, ich lachte verlockend, wie ich nie in meinem Leben gelacht habe, er streckte die Arme nach mir aus, nun wollte ich fliehen, doch ich vermochte es nicht – und er sank mir auf die Wiese hin.[13]
>
> [It was always the same one and each time someone else, he greeted me every time he passed me, but finally he stopped in front of me, examined me, I laughed seductively, the way I had never laughed before in my life, he stretched out his arms to me, and I wanted to run away, but I couldn't, and he pulled me down onto the grass.]

The things that happen to Schnitzler's couple, whether in dreams or during supposedly real, but perhaps imagined encounters, are quite extreme. But rather than a plea for sexually liberal behaviour, it is a plea for openness and honesty between husband and wife. When Fridolin and Albertine eventually tell each other of their adventures, they perceive it as a confirmation of their love for each other, in the realisation that they will both always be subject to temptation.

In Luigi Pirandello's "La realtà del sogno" [The Reality of the Dream] (1914), on the other hand, the imagined affair becomes more threatening than a real one could ever be. The six-year-old marriage of the story's protagonists has been rather unsatisfactory, because the wife's strict upbringing by an extremely jealous father has made her shy and unresponsive to her husband's sexual advances. When one night she has a dream in which she is seduced by her husband's best friend, who over dinner has vented his views on the relationship between demureness and passion in women, she discovers to her horror that she is capable of very passionate responses:

> She had betrayed him in her dream, betrayed, and she felt no remorse, no, but anger at herself, because she had been conquered, and spite, spite towards him, because during six years of marriage he had never, never made her experience what she now, in her dream, had experienced with someone else.[14]

For the female protagonist, the dream is profoundly disturbing, not only because it has made her aware of her own sexuality, but especially because it has opened her eyes to her husband's inadequacy in awakening and fulfilling her sexual desires. For her husband his wife's imagined affair becomes a genuine threat:

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[13] Arthur Schnitzler, *Traumnovelle* (1925; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999) 58.

[14] Luigi Pirandello, "La realtà del sogno," trans. into Dutch by Anthonie Kee as "De werkelijkheid van de droom," *Candelora: Novellen voor een jaar* (Amsterdam: Coppens & Frenks, 1996) 107.

> In the perfidious certainty that, although he knew that this deceit was reality and as such irreversible and irreparable, because committed and enjoyed until the end, he could not find her guilty. Her body – he could hit it, abuse it, tear it to pieces – but here you had it, it had belonged to somebody else, in the subconsciousness of the dream. It did not in fact exist, for that other man, the deceit; but it had been there and it remained here, here, for her, in her body that had enjoyed, a reality. (110)

The dream was, and still is, frequently used in literature, because of its effectiveness as a narrative vehicle for eroticism, not only because of the Freudian reference, but also because it underlines the pervasive and uncontrollable nature of sexual desire.

The stories in this category all suggest that sexual desire formed an important incentive for a married woman's illicit affair. This is likely to have been a disturbing idea for nineteenth-century readers and one of the reasons why the literary representation was frowned upon. It implied that sexual fulfilment was as important for women as it was for men and that the matrimonial bed was not necessarily the only or best place to find it, which not only subverted the contemporary view of female sexuality, but also of the male as the dominant figure in both marriage and society.

2.1.2. Transgression

The short stories in the second group that I distinguish are predominantly anecdotal and focus on the act of transgression of the adulteress and the events surrounding it, rather than on the emotions involved. It is the least coherent group, in which I have included stories that deal with the need for secrecy, the threat of the affair being discovered, the planning or committing of a crime incited by the fear of discovery, or a(n) (un)fortunate occurrence which is of essential importance to the adulterous affair. The stories in this category are sometimes filled with suspense and may resemble detective stories; sometimes they are lighthearted and humorous. Although these stories may be very different in tone, there is a distinct sense of moral unease caused by the awareness that adultery constitutes a breach of existing laws.

Maupassant's "La Chambre 11" [Room No. 11] (1884) relates how Madame Amandon's convenient arrangement with a local hotel, where she is always given room no. 11 to receive one of her many lovers, comes to an end when she one day discovers that the dead body of an unknown man has been temporarily stored in 'her' bed. She is in danger of being exposed. It is suggested that, in order to prevent this, she offers sexual favours to her husband's superior, thereby not only preventing her husband from finding out

about her adultery, but even securing his promotion and their transfer to a new town.[15] In "Le Mal d'André" [André's Pain] (1883), Captain Sommerive is frustrated by the fact that his nocturnal trysts with Maître Moreau's wife are constantly interrupted by the screams of her baby son, who can only be appeased when he is allowed to sleep in his mother's bed. The Captain resorts to drastic measures. Every time little Andrew manages to worm his way between the adulterous sheets, the lover secretly pinches the baby, so that after a few nights little Andrew has 'learned' that he is better off in his own bed. When the boy's father returns home, he finds his son covered in bruises. The story ends with the cuckolded husband dismissing the wetnurse, whom his wife has wrongfully accused of maltreating her son, in order to save her lover's and her own skin. The wetnurse, we are told, was never hired again.

Although at first sight these two stories present the adultery of the female protagonist as something rather banal, there are clear underlying threats and unforeseen consequences which are far from trivial. "La Chambre 11" shows that the adulteress is a potential victim of blackmail and as a result can become entangled in an intricate web of power relations.[16] Madame Amandon resolves her precarious situation with panache and a good deal of cunning, but the story underlines the potentially explosive nature of the wife's adulterous scheming. "Le Mal d'André" may at first sight appear just a *drôle* story, but it implicitly raises the issue of the victimization of the adulteress's child as a result of the mother's transgression.[17] Like Madame Amandon, the wife of Maître Moreau gets drawn into a web of deceit to mask her own transgression which damages innocent bystanders. Despite the humorous tone of these stories, there is a distinct suggestion that the effects of the wife's transgression can be complex and far-reaching.

In Maupassant's "Marroca" [Marroca] (1882), the exotic setting colours the rather primitive strategy of the adulterous wife to defend her amorous interests. The narrator, writing to a friend about his adventures during his stay in Africa, relates how he became involved with a local woman and found himself in an awkward position when he had to hide under the bed, because the woman's husband unexpectedly returned home. When the coast was clear, the lover found an axe on the chair by the bed. Was the axe there, as the woman claimed, to cut off the husband's head in case of discovery? Or should the lover be relieved to have escaped with his life? In a characteristically open ending, Maupassant has his protagonist conclude his report to his friend by saying: "Et voilà, mon cher, comment on comprend ici les devoirs conjugaux,

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[15] Armine Kotin Mortimer gives a very persuasive reading of this story in "Second Stories," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge [etc]: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 278-283.

[16] One of the most disturbing examples of a story about the blackmailing of an adulteress is Stefan Zweig's "Angst" [Fear] (1920), in which the female protagonist, when the ever-increasing demands of her blackmailer force her to confess her affair to her husband, learns that he staged the extortion in order to scare her into giving up her lover and to devote herself once more to her husband and family.

[17] The role of the adulteress's children is very significant in female adultery literature; I will discuss it in more depth in the next section of this chapter.

l'amour et l'hospitalité!" (Maupassant 1, 794) [And this, my dear friend, is what they here consider to be the duties of marriage, love and hospitality]. The story's setting places the events outside the world of Maupassant's readership, and the protagonist's final comment appears to be a reassurance that such aggressive behaviour need not be feared from civilized adulteresses. But the intimation is that all women might harbour an aggressive streak and that there is a distinct danger in getting involved with a married one.

The moment of choice of the adulterous woman between her husband and her lover is potentially very powerful story material, which was also used by Henry James in his first published story, "A Tragedy of Error" (1864). It is the story of Hortense Bernier, who, in order not to lose her lover, hires someone to kill her crippled husband, who is about to return home after a prolonged absence. James makes use of the literary conventions with regard to mistaken identity, but, unfortunately, the plotting of the killing is rather drawn out. The potential shock of the surprise ending is deflated by the narrator's premature disclosure of what went wrong in arranging Monsieur Bernier's death, and, as a result, the story's ending, with the murder of the lover instead of the husband, is not very successful. Wharton's story "The Choice" (1916) also plays upon a fortuitous death. When Isabel Stilling agrees to meet her lover in her boathouse, the couple are surprised by her husband. Both men fall into the water, and Isabel, in an attempt to save her lover from drowning, rescues the 'wrong' man, her husband. The story, which according to Wharton's biographer was written at one sitting "in a burst of savagery and despair" (Lewis, 228), is only moderately successful in terms of the surprise ending, as I will also argue in chapter 5. However, the emphasis on the plot resolution, to the detriment of the depiction of the effects on the characters, is rather unsatisfactory.

The female adultery short stories which I have placed in the category 'transgression' all share a considerable emphasis on the plot and on recounting a sequence of events which evolve around secret meetings. The stories often end with a sudden plot twist. The examples discussed here illustrate that an anecdotal approach of female adultery can be successful when the tone is predominantly lighthearted or when there is no emphasis on the psychology of the story's characters. The purely anecdotal approach tends to be less effective in more dramatic stories which end in a shocking occurrence or discovery. Possibly, the brevity of the form insufficiently allows the reader to fully grasp the immensity of the situation for the characters or to realize which effects it has on them.

2.1.3. Retribution

The emotional consequences of an adulterous affair, whether or not consummated, and the ensuing social repercussions form the central focus of a category of short stories that I have chosen to label 'retribution.' For although

individual views on female adultery may have been extremely diverse, according to the established nineteenth-century opinion, the woman guilty of transgression by breaking her marriage vows and the Seventh Commandment deserved to be punished. As I pointed out in chapter 1, most Western countries had seen major changes in the existing divorce laws by the end of the nineteenth century. It became technically possible for a woman to be released from an unhappy marriage and start a new life, with or without her lover. These legal changes, however, did not necessarily, and certainly not immediately, have a positive effect on the rigid social codes. The divorced adulteress often faced the retaliation of society, through ostracism from the circles to which she belonged. On an individual level, the breakdown of the relationship with the lover, especially after the adulteress had left her husband, was a cause of great unhappiness and anxiety. Equally painful was the psychological punishment of the adulterous wife, who had to deal with her feelings of guilt *vis-à-vis* her husband and children. All these issues are addressed in the fiction of the period, and the consequences of an adulterous affair, whether on a social or on a personal level, are predominantly depicted as negative. In fact, Theodor Fontane's short novel *L'Adultera* presents one of the few examples of female adultery fiction in which the adulterous love affair results in a happy, lasting relationship.

Society's response to the adulterous behaviour of the married woman is a topic which was of particular interest to Henry James. His short stories, or 'tales,' are on the whole considerably longer than average and often have a more complex plot structure than those of his contemporaries. The two themes that can be said to dominate both his novels and his short fiction are what he himself called the 'international subject,' meaning the relationships between Americans and Europeans and the corruption and despoiling of innocence and of the innocent. In his stories involving female adultery, James often confronts the innocent American with the sophisticated world of the Europeans in which marital infidelity is portrayed as forming part of everyday life. In "A London Life" (1888), for example, the inexperienced Laura Long goes to England to visit her sister Selina, who has married well from a financial, but not a romantic point of view and who has therefore taken a lover. In James's world, it is not the adulteress who is punished by society, but the innocent Laura who fails in her attempt to restore order in her family and finds herself compromised in the course of events.

The social position of the divorcee is the subject of James's "The Chaperon" (1891) and of Wharton's "Autres Temps..." (1911). The two stories open with the adulterous mother who is reunited with her daughter, after a long period in which communication had been made impossible. In "The Chaperon," Rose Tramore braves the opposition of her own family and that of her fiancé by deciding to use her influence to get her mother reintroduced into society; and she is very successful. The mother and daughter become a social sensation and society hostesses see their entertainment value:

> With a first-rate managerial eye she [the hostess] perceived that people would flock into any room – and all the more into one of hers – to see Rose bring in her dreadful mother. [. . .] It was an entertainment of which, that winter in the country, and the next season in town, persons of taste desired to give their friends the freshness. The thing was to make the Tramores come late, after every one had arrived. They were engaged for a fixed hour, like the American imitator and the Patagonian contralto.[18]

The reaction of James's society, for all its dubiousness, stands in marked contrast to that described in Wharton's "Autres Temps...." In this story, the ostracized Mrs. Lidcote returns to America after a long absence to support her daughter Leila, who has just shed one husband and is about to marry another. Mrs. Lidcote finds that the social mores have changed drastically and that Leila's bright, young set have come to accept divorce as an everyday thing. She also discovers, however, that she herself still bears the old stigma and that 'old' New York is as unforgiving as it used to be.[19]

The relationship which is born out of an adulterous affair is also sometimes shown to be a disappointment, as in Chekhov's "An Anonymous Story" (1893). The female protagonist Zinaïda Fyodorovna is disillusioned by the attitude of her lover Orlov, when she leaves her husband and moves into Orlov's bachelor apartment. His evident aversion to the bourgeois life that she wants them to lead is the cause of the end of their affair. However, Zinaïda has burned her bridges. In the company of the mysterious narrator, she flees to Italy, where she poisons herself after giving birth to Orlov's child.

Alternatively, the relationship with the lover may be dominated by feelings of guilt, as in Pirandello's "Il lume dell'altra casa" [The Light from the Other House] (1909). The story tells of Tullio Butti, who leads a solitary life and lives in a small room, constantly spied upon by his landlady and her daughter. Every day he watches a happy family at the dinner table in a house across the street, which reminds him of his happy childhood. Although this was never Tullio's intention, his landlady's gossip results in a meeting with the woman, Margherita. They fall in love and run away together, but turn up a few months later and ask the landlady's permission to use Tullio's old room. As they sit together in the dark, they watch the unbearable sight of "a father, defeated by the disaster" who looks into "the bewildered faces of his three children who did not dare to look towards the door, through which their mother would enter every evening with the steaming soup-tureen."[20] "Il lume dell'altra casa" is one of the saddest female adultery stories that I have come across, because it depicts, almost tangibly, the destructive effect which the adulterous

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[18] Henry James, "The Chaperon," *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 8 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963) 115-116.

[19] I will discuss this story at more length in chapter 5.

[20] Luigi Pirandello, "Il lume dell'altra casa," trans. into Dutch by Annegret Böttner and Leontine Bijman as "Het licht van het andere huis," *De Reis: Novellen voor een jaar* (Amsterdam: Coppens & Frenks, 1989) 250.

affair of the mother has on the family she leaves behind, and in particular on her children. The children are shown to be the victims of their mother's choice, and her compulsive need to watch the scene of utter desolation in the house across the street forms part of her punishment.

In the novels of female adultery, the role of the adulteress's child or children is highly significant.[21] The children, whom she may have with her husband or with her lover or with both men, tend to have an important function in the representation of the various implications of adultery. The relationship that the adulteress is shown to have with her children is moreover used to support her characterization. In short stories on female adultery, children play a less prominent role. The brevity of the short story form does not allow writers to introduce a large number of characters and forces them to focus on a core aspect of the adulterous affair, which usually involves the key players: the wife, the husband, and the lover. The children can be used very effectively, however, not so much as individual characters, but as symbols of the wife's responsibilities, which she is in danger of disregarding as a result of her adulterous affair.

2.1.4. Jealousy

The short stories which focus on a husband who is confronted with the (possible) adultery of his wife find a counterpart in a type of novel which, as I pointed out in chapter 1, is closely related to the female adultery novel, but in fact represents a different literary motif, that of the deceived husband. I have labelled this category of short stories 'jealousy,' as an overall qualification of a large variety of emotional reactions displayed by the deceived husband, ranging from anger and indignation to disappointment and dejection. The husband's anger and/or retaliation are directed at the wife, the lover, or both. There are husbands whose revenge is brutally direct and violent and those who choose to avenge themselves in more subtle ways. In some cases, even though there is no evidence of actual adultery, the husband is driven to distraction, or even murder, by the mere thought and unrelenting suspicion of his wife's adultery. There is little attention for the motivation of the adulterous wife, except when it forms part of the husband's inner turmoil at finding out about his wife's illicit affair(s).[22]

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[21] This subject has been discussed by: Naomi Segal, *The Adulteress's Child: Authorship and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1992); Loralee MacPike, "The Fallen Woman's Sexuality: Childbirth and Censure," *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984) 54-71; and Overton 2002, 49-67.

[22] The shortest story of this type must be Tonino Guerra's "The Three Plates." It reads: "A farmer who discovered that his wife had betrayed him, had the table set for three. And for the rest of their lives, they ate facing the third, empty plate." Tonino Guerra, *Il Polverone* (Milan: Bompiani, 1978). The translation is my own.

The husband's revenge depicted in "La Maîtresse de Notre Colonel" [The Mistress of our Colonel] (1834) by Honoré de Balzac is an example of a particularly gruesome reaction. We meet an Italian captain among the many dishevelled soldiers of the Napoleontic army, retreating from Moscow. He is accompanied by his Sicilian wife Rosina, who has for some time quite openly been the mistress of his colonel. Unable to bear the ridicule of the other soldiers, he sets fire to the Polish farmhouse which has served as their shelter for the night, leaving his wife and her lover to be burnt alive. Another horrifying example from Balzac's work is found in "La Grande Bretèche" (1842), in which the husband orders the closet in his wife's chamber, in which her lover is hiding, to be walled up. The story inspired Edith Wharton to write "The Duchess at Prayer" (1901), and I will therefore return to this Balzac story in chapter 5. The almost classic ending in which the husband shoots both his wife and her lover can be found in, for example, "A Cartomante" [The Card Reader] (1884) by Machado de Assis, in which Camilo is having an affair with the wife of his best friend, who finds out about it through an anonymous letter. Although Camilo is assured by a card reader that he has nothing to worry about, the affair comes to a violent end.

The husband's revenge becomes part of a grotesque perversion of facts in some of Luigi Pirandello's stories. In "La verità" [The Truth] (1912), Tararà stands trial for the murder of his wife, whose head he split open with an axe, because a few hours earlier, the police had caught her together with her lover. Tararà is a simple peasant, who is ignorant of many things, including his own age: "I live in the country, Your Honour. Who is interested in things like that."[23] He is also happy pretending that he is blissfully ignorant of his wife's irregular behaviour: "It was as if I didn't know about it!" (156). He confesses to having murdered his wife, but maintains that the lover's wife is the truly guilty party, since she brought the affair into the open, by calling the village police to catch the lovers in the act. As a result of the revelation, he was forced to acknowledge the affair and act according to the accepted code of honour in his farming community. In terms of Alison Sinclair's definition of deceived husbands in literature as either cuckolds or men of honour (Sinclair, 2), Tararà is a good example of one in whom both types are united. Tararà's simple-minded, but at the same time very clever, self-defence fails to convince the judge, but helps to endear him to the reader. When he is convicted to thirteen years imprisonment, we cannot help feeling more sorry for him than for his brutally murdered wife. The emphasis on the husband's role in the adulterous affair allows us to see that, in this story, it is Tararà who is the victim of social pressures, and not the transgressive wife. He has not acted in blind rage, out of jealousy, but because the local code of honour prescribed his revenge, making his act part of an unofficial system of justice, which forms part of a socially accepted tradition.

[23] Luigi Pirandello, "La Verità," trans. into Dutch by Anthonie Kee as "De waarheid," *Man alleen: Novellen voor een jaar* (Amsterdam: Coppens & Frenks, 1998) 150.

A similar example of such a system is represented by the duel. Until the end of the nineteenth century, duelling was in many countries, among men of higher social classes, an accepted way of settling disputes and defending one's honour. The duel was a frequently used literary topic in relation to female adultery, for example in Arthur Schnitzler's short stories "Erbschaft" [Legacy] (1887), "Das Tagebuch der Redegonda" [The Diary of Redegonda] (1909), and "Der Sekundant" [The Second] (1931).[24]

In "Erbschaft," the young army officer Emil is challenged to a duel by the husband of his lover Annette. Significantly, Annette's husband chooses to deliver the challenge himself, instead of sending a *Vertreter* [representative], thereby keeping "the knowledge of his wife's infidelity from the public eye" (Keiser, 26). He insists that the duel is fought as soon as possible. He tells Emil:

> Ich muß Ihnen bemerken, daß es mein ethisches Gefühl beleidigen würde, wenn zur Zeit da man meine . . . die Tote in die Erde senkt, noch ihre beiden Männer die Mögligkeit hätten, an ihrem Grabe zu weinen . . . [25]
>
> [I would like to point out that it would be an insult to my ethics, if the moment when my . . . the deceased is lowered into the earth, both her men were still in a position to weep at her grave . . .]

Emil is killed in the duel and the husband recounts in morbid detail to his friends in the *Kaffeehaus* [coffee house] the next day how he transported the dead body back to town. The event generates little satisfaction and elation, for we are told that "[a]lle schwiegen und waren ernst" [all were silent and solemn], while the sounds coming from the street appear "müde und traurig" [tired and sad] (38). In "Erbschaft," the duel is a standard response in a situation in which a man's honour has been insulted. The story's title not only refers to the letters found on the dead Annette from which her husband learns about her adulterous relationship with Emil, but also to "the social heritage of tradition in turn-of-the-century Vienna" (Keiser, 32). Schnitzler does not present duelling as intrinsically wrong or morally reprehensible, but he does criticize the rigidity of the social codes prescribing this way of acting and questions its usefulness.

Luigi Pirandello gives an unexpected twist to the phenomenon of duelling in "Quando s'è capito il giuoco" [When One Has Understood the Game] (1913), in which the deceived husband's revenge on his wife and her lover is subtle, but nasty. Memmo Viola has accepted his wife's affair with Guido Venanzi and

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[24] Two studies focusing on the duel in Arthur Schnitzler's work are: Brenda Keiser, *Deadly Dishonor: The Duel and the Honor Code in the Works of Arthur Schnitzler* (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1990) and Andrew C. Wisely, *Arthur Schnitzler and the Discourse of Honor and Dueling* (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1996).

[25] Arthur Schnitzler, "Erbschaft," *Sterben: Erzählungen 1880-1892* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992) 37.

has even agreed to live in separation. When she has been molested by a group of drunkards, she demands that Memmo challenge one of them to a duel. Memmo asks his wife's lover to act as his second; Guido warns Memmo that he will be up against the best amateur fencer in Rome and tries to dissuade him. But Memmo is full of confidence, which is easy to understand, for on the morning of the duel Memmo turns the tables on his wife's lover:

> "Do I have to duel?" Memmo answered Viola unperturbed. "You are joking, old chap! I have said that I have to play my part, and you have to play yours. I am the husband and I have called him out; but as far as the duelling is concerned, I beg your pardon, but for some time now that has not been my duty, dear Gigi, but yours . . . let's be honest!"[26]

And thus, unflinchingly, the deceived husband sends off his rival to a near certain death.

In contrast, the response of the husband is entirely introverted in two paired short stories by the Dutchman Marcellus Emants, entitled "Zwijgen" [Silence] and "Spreken" [Speaking] (1892).[27] The first story deals with civil servant Willem Blank's suspicions about his wife's friendship with a young lieutenant.[28] The husband's discovery of a correspondence between the two apparent lovers forces Blank to confront both lieutenant Siria and his wife with his suspicions. Both convince him that there was never an affair, but it does become clear that his wife is not as satisfied with her life as he expected. Blank is not inclined to soul searching, however, and he intends never to speak a word about their marriage again. In "Spreken," on the other hand, a young wife confesses to her husband that she at one point had planned to run away with a friend of theirs. Although the affair is already over when Clara decides to speak out, the news fundamentally changes her husband's view of his marriage.

> In het schemerdonker zag hij de toekomst zich ontrollen tot een lange, rechte, zonloze weg. Op die weg schreden zij naast elkaar voort, ontgoocheld zwijgend. Hij had haar geen verwijt toegevoegd, geen raad gegeven, geen verzoek gedaan. Van woorden wachtte hij geen heil; tot ingrijpende daden voelde hij zich onbekwaam.[29]

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[26] Luigi Pirandello, "Quando s'è capito il giuoco," trans. into Dutch by Jenny Tuin as "Als men het spel begrepen heeft," *Een dag: Novellen voor een jaar* (Amsterdam: Coppens & Frenks, 1992) 58-59.

[27] The two stories were originally published as a pair under the title "Dood" [Dead]. In a later edition, this title was changed to "Afgestorven." The Dutch word 'afgestorven' refers to the slow death of living things, such as parts of the human body.

[28] Emants's female protagonist is fittingly called Emma and the presumed lovers are depicted reading *Anna Karenina* together. For Emants's contemporaries, these references to famous adultery novels were probably clear.

[29] Marcellus Emants, "Spreken," *Afgestorven; Huwelijksgeluk; Een Kind* (1892; Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1967) 33.

> [In the dim light he saw the future unfold as a long, straight, sunless road. On that road they walked side by side, in silent disenchantment. He had not reproached her, given her no advice, made no request of her. He did not feel that words would solve anything; he felt incapable of radical deeds.]

The failure to respond to the crisis in the marriage is a signal of the emotional inadequacy of husbands which is often criticized implicitly in female adultery literature. It mirrors the implicit criticism on the sexual inadequacy of husbands, which I referred to in section 1 of this chapter.

In many short stories in this category, the husband does not find out about his wife's infidelity until after her death, often through the discovery of love letters addressed to her. While the discovery of the identity of the wife's lover can be an incentive for revenge, as it was for the husband in Schnitzler's "Erbschaft," for whom it was the signal to challenge the lover to a duel, the wife's death takes away the possibility to confront her with or to punish her for the affair. More importantly, the husband's memories of a happy marriage suddenly appear to be false, and, having been given a reason to doubt her presumed love for him, the husband is left utterly bewildered. In Arthur Schnitzler's story "Der Andere" [The Other One] (1889) a widower reports in his diary that he is overcome with jealousy when he sees another, younger man kneeling on the grave of his wife. All the certainties about his wife's love for him vanish into thin air.

> Und da stand ich . . . so wie ich jetzt vor diesem Blatt Papier sitze . . . dem Wahnsinn nahe . . . Wer ist dieser Mann, der es wagt, auf dem Grabe meiner Gattin zu knien? . . . Was war er ihr? . . . Wie erfahre ich's? . . . Wo finde ich ihn wieder? . . . Plötzlich verzerrt sich mir die ganze Vergangenheit . . . Bin ich denn toll? . . . Hat sie mich denn nicht geliebt? . . . Ist sie nicht hier hinter meinem Sessel hundertmal gewesen, hat ihre Lippen auf meinen Kopf gepreßt und mit den Händen meinem Hals umschlungen? . . . Waren wir nicht glücklich?[30]
>
> [And there I stood . . . just as I now sit before this piece of paper . . . nearly insane . . . Who is this man that dares to kneel on my wife's grave? . . . What was he to her? . . . How do I find out? . . . Where do I find him again? . . . Suddenly the entire past becomes distorted . . . Am I going mad? . . . Didn't she love me then? . . . Didn't she stand behind my chair a hundred times, press her lips to my head and put her arms around my neck? . . . Weren't we happy?]

While in "Der Andere," the husband's feelings are only based on suspicions, in "Der Witwer" [The Widower] (1894), the discovery of the love letters written to

[30] Arthur Schnitzler, "Der Andere," *Sterben: Erzählungen 1880-1892* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992) 63.

his wife by his best friend provide the tangible proof of his wife's infidelity. Initially the widower Richard is astonished: "Und er staunt nur, wie er das mit einem Schlage so völlig begreift, obwohl er doch nie daran gedacht."[31] [And he is amazed, how he all of a sudden understands, although he had never thought of it]. But when he finds out that his friend is planning to get engaged, he becomes enraged: not only was he betrayed by his wife, he is now also betrayed by his best friend.

Guy de Maupassant takes a different perspective on the triangular relationship of husband, wife, and lover in "Le Vengeur" [The Avenger] (1883). In this story, a man who has recently married the widow of his best friend feels his love for his new wife disappear in an instant, when she tells him that she once cheated on her first husband: "Il fut obligé de s'asseoir dans le lit tant il se sentit saisi, la respiration coupée, bouleversé comme s'il venait d'apprendre qu'il était lui-même cocu" (Maupassant 1, 914). [He felt that something had grabbed him by the throat, and he had to sit up in bed, his breath cut short, bowled over as if he had just found out that he himself had been given horns]. The wife's second husband feels the indignation at his wife's deceit of her first husband as if it had happened to him.

These stories, although in very different ways, address the complex relationship between the men involved in adulterous affairs of women. The widower in "Der Andere" has conflicting emotions about the young man whom he sees at his wife's grave. He is both jealous of him, but also commiserates with him over the loss of the woman whose love they may have shared. In "Der Witwer," the husband's anger at his wife's lover is caused by intense disappointment at the loss of a long and valuable friendship, which cannot continue now that his best friend has betrayed his trust by becoming his wife's lover, but has also betrayed his wife, by getting engaged to another woman. Maupassant's *vengeur* feels he has to redress the wrongs done to his dead friend. His friendship with the deceased Souris ultimately appears more important than his marriage to his widow. These stories by Arthur Schnitzler and Guy de Maupassant provide instances of male communion which seem more important than the relationship with the woman involved. Chekhov offers similar, although much more lighthearted examples of male solidarity in "Ninochka" (1885) and "From Having Nothing to Do" (1886). As Sinclair observes, "[t]he *why* of male bonding is [. . .] harder to divine than the apparent ease of its observation might suggest" (Sinclair, 203; Sinclair's italics), but a negative feeling towards the woman involved, ranging from a deep mistrust to condescension, almost always appears to be part of it.

In a number of short stories, however, the husband is shown to be forgiving. In Eça de Queirós's "The Yellow Sofa" (1891),[32] Senhor Godofredo da Conceiçao Alves displays the socially prescribed reaction when he discovers his

[31] Arthur Schnitzler, "Der Witwer," *Komödiantinnen: Erzählungen 1893-1898* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1990) 86.

[32] "The Yellow Sofa" was first published posthumously in 1925, but was probably written around 1891. J.M. Eça de Queirós, jr., Introductory Note, *The Yellow Sofa & Three Portraits*, trans. John Vetch (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993), 3-6.

young wife Lulu in the arms of his business partner Machado, on the yellow sofa, needless to say. He sends her back to her father and is determined to challenge the lover to a duel. The seconds, however, decide that the punishment does not fit the crime, since it was, after all, only a youthful indiscretion. Alves soon tires of his lonely life and empty home; he falls in love with his wife all over again and is reconciled with his rival: "And now the memory merely makes him smile. But it also makes him think; for that incident remains the outstanding event of his life, and from it he draws his general philosophy and his normal reflections. As he often says to Machado, what a wise thing is prudence!"[33] Unfortunately for the husband and lover in Maupassant's "Une Passion" [A Passion] (1882), Madame Poinçot refuses to cooperate when her husband begs her to come back to him. His motive is practical, but he does not have his own comfort in mind. The disappearance of their mother has ruined their daughters' chances of a good marriage. The lover, who has already tired of his mistress, supports Monsieur Poinçot's request, but the adulteress is clear in her verdict: "Vous êtes deux misérables!" (Maupassant 1, 831) [You are both despicable!]. The husband aptly sums up the men's situation: "Nous sommes bien malheureux, Monsieur" (Maupassant 1, 831) [We are indeed very unfortunate, Monsieur]. In these instances, the response of the husbands is one of resignation to the adultery of their wives. As such, the stories also form an ironic comment on male dominance in marriage in a patriarchal society.

The role of the deceived husband is sometimes taken over by the adulteress's son. In Guy de Maupassant's "La Veillée" [The Wake] (1882), the adulteress's love letters are not discovered by the grieving widower, but by her children, as they decide to make a shroud of the letters which she read over and over again during her lifetime. For the son, a "magistrat aux principes inflexibles" (Maupassant 1, 795) [a magistrate with inflexible principles], this is the reason to turn his back upon his mother, "la mère qu'il avait séparée d'eux, condamnée" (Maupassant 1, 798) [the mother who has been separated from them, condemned]. The son takes on the avenging role that we would expect the bereaved husband to play, passing judgement upon the transgressive wife even after death. Edith Wharton's variation on this plot can be found in "His Father's Son" (1909), the story of young Ronald Grew, who persuades himself that he is not the son of the respectable manufacturer Mason Grew, but of a well-known European pianist. The letters which the artist sent to Mrs. Grew seem to suggest that the two had an affair in the years before her only son was born. Instead of renouncing his mother on account of her supposed transgressive behaviour, the letters awaken a romantic sense of mistaken identity in the son.[34]

Crucial in all these stories is that the adulterous women turn out to have had secret lives and unknown identities. The response of the deceived

[33] José María Eça de Queirós, "The Yellow Sofa," *The Yellow Sofa & Three Portraits*, trans. John Vetch (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993) 111.
[34] I wil discuss this story at more length in chapter 6.

husbands in the stories in this category is not only incited by feelings of jealousy towards the wife's lover, but also by their unease at the realization that their wives have been able to withdraw from patriarchal control and have been undermining the security of their own position as head of the family. As a result of the focus on the deceived husband in these stories, we hear little or nothing about these wives, about their motivation for the illicit relationship and about their emotions. Kate Chopin's "Her Letters" (1895) is therefore a striking variation on this type of story. In Chopin's short story we first meet a woman, who is sorting out her personal things in the days before her expected death. When she finds the letters which her lover wrote to her, she cannot bring herself to burn them; instead she leaves the bundle in her desk, with a note to her husband, asking him to destroy the letters unopened. After her death, the husband complies with her wishes, but he becomes haunted by suspicions about the nature of the letters. The unsolvable uncertainty about his wife's infidelity drives him to distraction and eventually to suicide. As I will show in chapter 4, this dual take on the situation provides an entirely different perspective both on the transgression of the adulteress and the jealousy of the husband.

2.1.5. Liberation

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a literary trend in women's writing which was generally associated with the 'New Woman,' that "creature who turned up in all sorts of political, cultural and literary debates in the 1890s in particular."[35] Prominent English representatives were writers such as George Egerton, Sarah Grand, and Olive Schreiner, who was born in South Africa, but who wrote and published in England. Outside England, the German writers Hedwig Dohm and Gabrielle Reuter were known as 'neue Frauen' or, in a term launched by Hedwig Dohm, 'Übergangsgeschöpfe.'[36] In Scandinavia, the Norwegian/Danish Amalie Skram,

[35] Gerd Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel, 1880-1900* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987) 129. Bjørhovde writes: "Obviously the term 'New Woman' meant different things to different people: some identified her primarily with political activism, so that 'suffragist' or 'suffragette' was to become one byword for the term. Others seemed more preoccupied with her external appearance – 'rational dress' becoming a key word for a time at this period – or with her physical fitness; the 'New Woman' being associated with physical strength and agility, in marked contrast to conventional ideals of femininity which were associated with delicacy, frailty and hyper-sensitivity" (Bjørhovde, 129). Lyn Pykett, in *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing,* defines the 'New Woman' as "the embodiment of a complex of social tendencies" (139). She was seen as a "harbinger of social change" (140) and also as a threat to the natural order, because "the spectre of the 'mannish' New Woman who questioned her biological destiny of motherhood threatened to dissolve existing gender boundaries" (140). Paradoxically, the 'New Woman' was also believed to be extremely susceptible to feeling, even hysteria, and "unduly interested in and familiar with sexual feeling" (140).

[36] "Mit einem Wort: Wir sind Übergangsgeschöpfe." Hedwig Dohm, *Christa Ruland* (Berlin, 1902); reprinted in Philippa Reed, "Vom 'Angel in the House' zur 'neuen Frau.' Zu den

and the Swedish Victoria Benedictsson and Anne Charlotte Leffler may be seen as representatives of the 'nutidskvinnan.' The 'New Woman' writers were highly concerned with the role of women as wives and mothers and, as Lyn Pykett points out, were "engaged in a probing exploration and critique of marriage and the family" (Pykett 1992, 143). According to Pykett, "[i]n the New Woman fiction, [. . .] woman's lives are presented as inherently problematic, and unhappiness is the norm. Whatever path they choose, whether they conform to or break with convention, women are likely to be thwarted and frustrated" (Pykett 1992, 144). The 'New Woman' writers tended to attack marriage by representing it as a form of life in which it was impossible for women to find true happiness, or even as a form of slavery or legalised prostitution.

The short story genre appears to have been a particularly attractive form for the women writers who arrived on the literary scene around the turn of the century. Mary Louise Pratt's view, to which I referred in my introduction, that the short story has always been a genre used to introduce new and controversial subjects into the literary arena is substantiated by the short story work of the 'New Woman' writers. That female adultery also formed a topic which was addressed in these short stories goes without saying. Elaine Showalter points out that these women wrote "with unprecedented candour about female sexuality, marital discontent, and their own aesthetic theories and aspirations" and found that "the short story offered flexibility and freedom from the traditional plots of the three-decker Victorian novel, plots which invariably ended in the heroine's marriage or her death," because the short story "emphasised psychological intensity and formal innovation."[37] Patricia Stubbs argues that the short story, with "its characteristic inconclusiveness, its open-ended or deliberately evasive resolutions"[38] was especially suitable for dealing with the new themes literature was turning to at the end of the nineteenth century: the changes in sexual morality and sexual relations and the increasing (sexual) freedom of women. When we look at the 'New Woman' writers' short stories involving female adultery, we see that it is often treated not as a transgression, but as a liberation from the constraints of marriage and as a discovery of sexual identity. The adulterous relationship is never the central issue, but rather a means to an end. The utopian ideal of self-realisation and fulfilment is, however, usually not achieved.

Gabriele Reuter's "Five o'clock" (1902) is the story of a recently widowed woman, who tries to enjoy the freedom of living her own life, which includes the freedom of having a lover.

Weiblichkeitsentwürfen in Hedwig Dohms Romantrilogie," *Frauensprache – Frauenliteratur? Für und Wider einer Psychoanalyse literarischer Werke*, eds. Inge Stephan and Carl Pietzcher (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1986) 84.

[37] Elaine Showalter, Introduction, *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the 'Fin de Siècle'* (London: Virago, 1993) viii and ix.

[38] Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Brighton: The Harvester Press; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979) 104-105.

> Das Gefühl . . . Allein das Gefühl: frei zu sein, auf alles Verbotene, heimlich Umschlichene die Hand legen zu können! Alles zu dürfen! Nur die Wahl haben: was und wie. Wenn das schon war wie ein entzückender Rausch, wie mußte erst das Erleben sein! . . . [39]
>
> [The feeling . . . The feeling alone: of being free, of being able to touch all those things which were prohibited, secretly hidden. To be allowed to do everything! Simply to have the choice: what and how! If that was already like an enchanting intoxication, what would the experience itself be like! . . .]

The story forms an interesting parallel with Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." Although the endings of both stories are radically different, there is a distinct similarity in the evocation of the temporary feeling of freedom which both female protagonists enjoy.[40] In Reuter's stories "[d]as Gefühl der Leere, der Unerfülltheit, der Enttäuschung oder Verzweifelung dominiert, und diese Gefühle, auch wenn sie nicht von Dauer sein müssen, enthalten jene Zeitkritik, auf die es ankommt."[41] [The feeling of emptiness, of unfulfillment, of disappointment or desperation dominates, and these feelings, even if they are not necessarily lasting, contain the social criticism that is important]. In another story by Gabriele Reuter, "Treue" [Fidelity] (1902), a divorced woman has an affair during her holidays, which frees her temporarily from her depression. When she hears of her ex-husband's wishes to get remarried and have their only son live with him, she realizes that, despite her attempt to break away, she will never be truly free from him: "Es war umsonst gewesen – alles umsonst. Sie war nicht vom ihm gerettet – sie mußte die Qual weiter tragen, ihr Leben lang."[42] [It had been in vain – all in vain. She had not been saved from him – she had to endure the misery, for the rest of her life]. The stories in *Frauenseelen* show, like her female adultery novel *Ellen von der Weiden*, that Gabriele Reuter was sceptical about the chances of finding happiness in marriage, but also about women's opportunities to free themselves from an unhappy marriage.

In Scandinavia, the 'New Woman' writers Amalie Skram and Victoria Benedictsson both primarily achieved literary success with their novels, among them their female adultery novels *Constance Ring* and *Fru Marianne*, respectively. Anne Charlotte Leffler's most interesting contribution to

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[39] Gabriele Reuter, "Five O'Clock," *Frauenseelen: Novellen* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1902) 153-154.

[40] In Reuter's "Five o'clock," the woman, when her admirer fails to turn up, realizes that she misses the husband who had always seemed such a brake on her freedom. In Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," on the other hand, the woman who has been informed of her husband's death in a train crash dies a sudden death when she discovers that her husband actually survived the accident.

[41] Livia Z. Wittmann, "'Übergangsgeschöpfe.' Eine erneute kritische Reflexion über Gabriele Reuters Novellenband *Frauenseelen*," *Frauensprache – Frauenliteratur? Für und Wider einer Psychoanalyse literarischer Werke*, eds. Inge Stephan and Carl Pietzcher (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1986) 75. The translation is my own.

[42] Gabriele Reuter, "Treue," *Frauenseelen: Novellen* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1902) 49.

nineteenth-century Scandinavian literature is, however, generally thought to be the collection of short stories which she published between 1882 and 1890, under the encompassing title *Ur Lifvet* [From Life]. Leffler, who was also known under her husband's name Edgren, aimed at exposing the hypocrisy of contemporary Swedish society, especially with regard to the role of women and "her attitude may be summarized with the title of one of her stories from her second collection: 'I Krig med Samhället' [At War with Society] (1883)."[43] In this long story, the female protagonist Arla has been married for ten years to a respectable, but rather dull civil servant and her dreams of a marriage filled with romance have been shattered. When she meets the young radical Berndtson, he opens her eyes to a world of unconventionalism. Arla decides to leave her husband and her children and to go abroad with Berndtson, where they share a fulfilling life of work and study. Despite her apparent success in breaking away from her past, she still feels guilty about having left her children and tries to re-establish contact upon her return to Sweden. Although her son is happy to see her again, her daughter refuses to acknowledge her mother and Arla has to accept that her child has been raised with the conventional notions that she herself has rejected. Leffler's story is a good example of the importance that women writers of her generation attached to the discussion on the role of motherhood in women's lives.

Generally speaking, as I observed above, the role of motherhood is less explicit in the short stories on female adultery than it is in the novels. In short stories by women authors, however, children and motherhood tend to play a more important role than in those by their male colleagues. The 'New Woman' writers stress the dilemma that women are faced with when they are forced to choose between their personal needs for self-development and their desire to fulfil the traditional mother role. In "I Krig med Samhället," the narrator echoes Arla's emotions in:

> Stackars barn, stackars barn! och stackars mor! Hvad lifvet ändå var grymt! Hvarför skulle hjärtats pligter komma i en sådan fruktansvärd konflikt med hvarandra? Hvarför skulle man nödgas slita sig själf i stycken och offra halfva sitt lif för att rädda den andra hälften från undergång?[44]
>
> [Poor children, poor children! and poor mother! How cruel life was! Why should the duties of the heart come in such terrible conflict with each other? Why should one have to cut oneself into pieces and sacrifice half of one's life to save the other half from destruction?]

Although, in the eyes of some, the 'New Woman' was "a selfish and self-centred creature, rejecting her traditional womanly nature and duties in order

[43] Lars G. Warme, ed., *A History of Swedish Literature* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) 239.
[44] Anne Charlotte Leffler, "I krig med samhället," *Ur lifvet: Andra Samlingen* (Stockholm: Z. Hæggströms Förlags Expedition, 1883) 225.

to realize her own ambitions" (Bjørdhovde, 3), many of the 'New Woman' writers themselves stressed the importance of woman's search for her true identity, which certainly included her identity as a wife and mother, as long as these roles did not stand in the way of personal development and as long as women were considered equal to men.

This view was emphatically propagated by the English writer George Egerton. Egerton was something of a literary sensation in the 1890s, as a result of her publication of two collections of short stories: *Keynotes* in 1893 and *Discords* in 1894. She became especially notorious for the frank way in which she dealt with women's sexual feelings. Martha Vicinus says in her introduction to a modern edition of both collections:

> Egerton in particular felt compelled to describe with a new vehemence and confidence the importance of honouring women's sexuality. She opposed the demeaning notion that woman's honour consisted in her technical virginity before marriage, and asserted through the characters that a woman must have a full life – marriage, maternity and work. The reverse of these demands was an extreme distaste for any life that was less than its full potential.[45]

According to Pykett, Egerton insisted "on the primacy and autonomy of women's sexual feeling, and the detailed representation of an eroticised feminine sensibility" (Pykett 1992, 166-167). Although female adultery cannot be said to be a prominent theme in Egerton's work, it features as a transgressive act in stories like "A Little Grey Glove" (1893) and "Gone Under" (1894), and as a temptation in one of her most frequently discussed stories, "A Cross Line" (1893).

"Gone Under" (1894) is a brutally realistic story, in which, apart from female adultery, sexual exploitation, the death of a child and alcoholism are important ingredients. The narrator becomes acquainted with a young woman, who is living together with a man who, it is suggested, has incited her to work as a prostitute. Egerton here echoes the view expressed by several 'New Woman' writers that marriage is a form of legal prostitution. When the young woman becomes attracted to other men, she displays feelings of guilt about breaking her 'marriage' vows, but especially also about the intensity of her sexual desires: "One just gets insane, and lets oneself be carried away. I think the devil gets hold of one. I tried to attract him; there was a kind of excitement in it, . . . and . . . well, we let ourselves drift . . ."[46] Although the story's plot is that of a Victorian melodrama, it interesting for these insights into the mind of the woman.

Egerton's most famous story, "A Cross Line," is stylistically very different. The female protagonist, an outdoor-loving woman, is married to a kind, but

[45] Martha Vicinus, Introduction, *Keynotes & Discords*, by George Egerton (1893 and 1894; London: Virago, 1983) viii-ix.
[46] George Egerton, "Gone Under," *Keynotes & Discords* (1893 and 1894; London: Virago, 1983) 103.

rather unadventurous man, who characterizes their marriage with: "being married to you is like chumming with a chap!"[47] On one of her rambles, she meets a grey-eyed stranger, with whom she starts an intimate friendship, although it remains unclear whether this includes physical intimacy. The man offers to take her abroad, but the woman discovers that she is pregnant and decides to stay with her husband. More important than the plot are "the associations, suggestions, allusions, thoughts, dreams, fantasies which are inserted into the text, and which combine to make this story come across as a text both concerned with conveying a specific atmosphere and with analysing feminine psychology" (Bjørdhovde, 138). The woman is presented as sensitive, rebellious, and sexually active, but also as somewhat discontented and restless. She replies to the man's proposal to run off together with: "Can't you understand where the spell lies? It is the freedom, the freshness, the vague danger, the unknown that has a witchery for me, ay, for every woman!" (Egerton, 27). In a lengthy daydream sequence, the reader is presented with the woman's escapist, erotic fantasies, but the passage also "examines woman's habitual denial of their own power and desire" (Pykett 1992, 172). The female protagonist of "A Cross Line" ultimately makes a choice in favour of motherhood, instead of herself as a free individual and sexual being.

The 'New Woman' writers added a new voice to turn-of-the-century literature. They turned to a well known literary motif to give their progressive views on the position of women in contemporary society. Many of them did so in a style and a language which was highly reminiscent of Victorian melodrama and too aggressively didactic to appeal to a wide audience. However, some of them, like George Egerton, "developed an aesthetic practice in which, at its most highly charged moments, writing became equated with feeling" (Pykett 1992, 168). They represented not only a new wave in the thinking about the position of women, but also the introduction of new ways of telling a story, thereby anticipating the modern short story.

2.2. Conclusion

The short story genre offered writers the opportunity to employ female adultery as a literary motif in ways which differed from its uses in the novel. Building on the assumption that their readers were entirely familiar with the social, economic and moral implications of female adultery, writers concentrated on certain aspects or phases of the transgressive affair, instead of telling the integral story. Most female adultery novels deal with all or most of the aspects which form the basis for my categorization of the corpus of turn-of-the-century short stories, because the novel allows for such a comprehensive approach. The novels, either explicitly or implicitly, address the wife's motivation for her transgression, as well as her husband's and society's

[47] George Egerton, "A Cross Line," *Keynotes & Discords*, 17.

response and the adultery's consequences. The brevity of the short story, however, obliged writers to focus on a limited number of aspects, sometimes just one. The stories which I have grouped under the heading 'desire,' for example, focus on the wife's sexual motivation for her transgression, thereby not totally ignoring the consequences of the affair, but in most cases giving them a lower priority. Similarly, the stories which focus on the jealousy of the husband or the retribution following the adultery tend to place less emphasis on the wife's motivation for her transgressive behaviour.

The kind of subdivision which I have proposed with regard to the representation of female adultery in short stories possibly also applies to other complex literary themes or motifs, such as courtship or coming-of-age (as used in the term *Bildungsroman)*. It falls outside the scope of this study to investigate this hypothesis, but it is conceivable that the treatment of a literary topic in short fiction pivots on aspects or phases which are generally accepted as being essential, and that short stories offer the representation of the highlights of a topic, which, if strung together, provide a comprehensive depiction. The comparison of the use of a certain literary theme or motif in shorter and longer fiction might lead to new insights into the work of authors who wrote both short stories and novels on the same topic. Additionally, the study of the use of certain themes or motifs in short stories across the decades may reveal either consistency in what are perceived to be, in Wharton's words, the "crucial instances,"[48] or may reveal significant shifts of interest.

Writers seem to have found the short story genre particularly suitable for the introduction of this controversial topic, because it provided them with more freedom, both in terms of the genre's exposure and its narrative structure. I have suggested that short stories were generally subjected to less rigorous critical and readerly scrutiny, because they were often (first) published in magazines or in a collection of short stories, diverting the reader's attention to a large variety of other contributions in the magazine, or to the other stories in a collection. The flexibility which the genre offered in terms of the ending or closure of the story, in contrast to the prescribed or expected ending of the nineteenth-century novel, allowed writers to leave much unresolved or undiscussed, thereby at least suggesting resolutions which would be uncommon or even unacceptable in novels.

My survey of female adultery short stories shows that, across Western Europe, the motif was used to highlight similar issues surrounding the role of women in marriage and in society. Chopin's and Wharton's stories on female adultery blend into the European turn-of-the-century short story tradition on this subject. Both Chopin and Wharton wrote female adultery stories in almost all of the categories which I have defined and my analysis of these stories will reveal that they employed the motif in ways similar to those in which their European colleagues and predecessors used it. But how did they fit into the American tradition? Before I examine Chopin's and Wharton's female adultery

[48] *Crucial Instances* is the title of Wharton's second volume of short stories, published in 1901.

short stories in part II of this book, I will discuss three different kinds of writing on female adultery by American women writers from the second half of the nineteenth century: newspaper articles on marriage-related issues written by women, the work of the columnist Fanny Fern, and the sensation literature of Louisa May Alcott. In radically different ways, these writers contributed to the public debate on the role of women in marriage in mid-nineteenth-century patriarchal society, a debate which Chopin and Wharton were to continue as the age progressed into the twentieth century.

Chapter 3

Perfect spouses and married sirens
Nineteenth-century American women's writing on wives, faithful and unfaithful

"What is the bud to the perfect rose? The timid, blushing maiden pales and subsides before the married siren who has the audacity and charm of a conscious intelligence."[1] This is a quotation from an article which appeared in the *North American Review* of January 1893, entitled "Flirting Wives," by Amelia E. Barr, in which she expresses her opinion on the danger posed to society by married women that engage in "post-nuptial flirtation" (69). Barr's article is one of several on marriage as an institution in contemporary society, on the role of women in marriage, and on the increasingly topical issue of divorce which were published in American periodicals throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The article is also evidence of the fact that female adultery was not as unmentionable a subject in nineteenth-century American print culture as it is often thought to have been.

In this chapter, I will discuss three different types of American women's writing on female adultery dating from the decades preceding and partly overlapping the start of Chopin's and Wharton's literary careers. My purpose is to illustrate how this topic was addressed by Chopin's and Wharton's precursors and, thus, to place their female adultery stories in a historical perspective of American women's writing on the role of women in marriage and related issues. In the first section, I will examine the contribution of women to the public debate on these issues, by discussing a number of articles by women writers which were published in the *North American Review* in the second half of the nineteenth century. In view of the enormous number of newspapers and magazines which existed in America in this period, it is virtually impossible to give a comprehensive overview of opinions which were vented in the various periodicals. I have chosen to limit my survey to articles which appeared in the *North American Review*, because it was considered to be

[1] Amelia E. Barr, "Flirting Wives," *North American Review* 156.434 (January 1893): 71. Subsequent citations from articles which appeared in the *North American Review* are indicated by means of references in brackets to the original page numbers of the magazine edition. For all articles: Cornell Making of America, 1 March 2008 <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/moa_search.html>.

one of the leading magazines of the period and may therefore be assumed to represent the general opinion on topical issues.

In the following two sections, I will discuss the use of female adultery in the short fiction of two American women writers, Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott, who achieved great success in the decades preceding the start of Chopin's and Wharton's literary careers. I will argue that their use of the motif involved a choice of certain subgenres of the short story, motivated by a combination of ideological, artistic and commercial considerations. I will also examine whether Fern and Alcott employed point-of-view techniques with a view to influencing their readers' interpretation, although my examination of this aspect of their writings will not be as detailed as my analysis of narrative perspective in Chopin's and Wharton's short stories.

In the second section of this chapter, I will examine the way female adultery was dealt with in the work of Fanny Fern, who has been referred to as "the first [. . .] columnist in the twentieth-century sense of the word: a professional journalist paid a salary to write a regular column expressing the author's personal opinions on social and political issues."[2] Fern wrote satirical sketches in which the adulterous inclinations of married women were used to ridicule the existing marital conventions, but she counterbalanced her satirical work with sentimental stories which advocated society's accepted moral values. I will argue that Fern's use of both subgenres can be seen as complementary, in that her sentimental stories made the outspokenness of her satirical work more acceptable for her readers.

In the third section, I will discuss the use of the female adultery motif in the sensation fiction of one of America's most popular nineteenth-century women writers, Louisa May Alcott. As I have argued in chapter 1, sensation novels, with their complicated plots, filled to the brim with a large variety of unconventional emotional and sexual relationships, enjoyed tremendous popularity in both Britain and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Modern critics have been eager to point out that women writers of sensation fiction used their work to challenge existing moral and social values. I want to suggest, however, that such a reading of sensation fiction is in danger of overemphasizing the ideological motivation of authors to write this type of fiction, while minimizing the financial reasons they may have had. In the 1970s, Louisa May Alcott, whose reputation as a writer was mainly based on her fiction for young adults, was unmasked as an unexpected contributor to sensation fiction. Whereas several critics have argued that the discovery of her "blood & thunder" tales, as she called them,[3] have revealed a different side of Alcott's personality, indeed have given us a glimpse of the 'real' Alcott, I want to underline her commercial motivation for writing this type of fiction. Her use

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[2] Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 104.

[3] Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987) 79; reprinted in Madeleine B. Stern, ed., Introduction, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers*, by Louisa May Alcott (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) xiii.

of the female adultery motif appears to have been inspired by her awareness of the required ingredients for a steamy story which would appeal to her publishers and her readers, rather than her desire to use her writing to express subversive views.

3.1. "The cultivation of their womanly virtues": The public debate on the matrimonial position of women[4]

Frank Luther Mott, the writer of the standard work *A History of American Magazines*,[5] opens the preface of volume 2, with: "There is a certain fascination about old magazines. It springs, I think, from their personal quality. [. . .] The magazines have always echoed popular ideologies, presented personal but representative emotional responses, interpreted the men and women of their own days" (Mott 2, vii). In nineteenth-century America, as in other Western countries, magazines played a major role in the public debate on almost every issue imaginable, including marriage, adultery and divorce. In addition, the American nineteenth-century magazines were of great importance in the advancement of American literature; the growing number of American periodicals offered a platform for the also growing number of American writers of both poetry and fiction.[6] Apart from general magazines, there were several specialized magazines, aiming at a specific audience, which greatly influenced the way in which especially controversial subjects were discussed. The ladies' magazines, which were keen to propagate the concept of the 'True Woman,' treated adultery by women as virtually unthinkable, and in any case as utterly reprehensible. The 'quality magazines,' which were aimed primarily at both male and female middle-class and upper-class readers, discussed the judicial aspects of adultery as a ground for divorce, but were hesitant to investigate the causes for the adulterous inclinations of wives. They often suppressed discussion by simply referring to it as a breach of the Seventh Commandment, perhaps because they feared that this would force them to acknowledge that the concepts upon which patriarchal society was based were flawed. Despite the covertness with which the subject was treated, the publications in periodicals represent a type of discourse on female adultery which form extremely interesting complementary reading to the novels and short stories on the topic. They provide insight into the ongoing public debate on the

[4] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from Rose Terry Cooke, "Are women to blame?," *North American Review* 148.390 (May 1889): 629.

[5] My main sources of information on the history of American magazines have been Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930-1968) and John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[6] The absence of international copyright laws until 1891 resulted in large-scale pirating of especially British books and magazines. The introduction of these laws meant a boost to the publication of the work of American writers in American magazines (Mott 2, 41-42 and 229-230).

position of women, in and outside marriage, and hence into the background against which the fiction writers wrote about female adultery.

American society was growing increasingly complex as it was moving towards the *fin-de-siècle* period. It presented a wealth of topics for the contemporary media, which were becoming more varied in nature. The 'quality magazine,' which was primarily aimed at the well educated and affluent, published debates and commentaries on topical issues, but was usually "leisurely in habit, literary in tone, retrospective rather than timely, and friendly to the interests of the upper classes. It retained a certain aloofness, as a serene observer of the passing scene" (Mott 4, 2). The position of the 'quality magazine' was influenced radically as a result of the advent, in the 1890s, of the highly successful 'ten-cent magazines,' which contained only or mainly fiction. This new type of magazine, which in America also came to be known as the 'dime novel' and which had a British equivalent in the 'penny dreadful' or 'shilling shocker,' could be sold at less than a third of the price of the established magazines, because its publishers made use of new, cheap printing and engraving techniques. The attractive price drew millions of new readers, and these publications were accused of catering to the taste of the less well educated and the less well off by being sensational, rather than literary and morally didactic (Mott 4, 3-7). In response to these developments, many of the 'quality magazines' adapted their style and contents to the growing demand for articles on current events and issues and "the magazines came to represent as never before the complex currents of thought and feeling in the closing years of the century" (Mott 4, 10).[7] A large-scale survey of American periodicals that was carried out in 1892 concluded that periodical literature was "exercising an almost incalculable influence upon the moral and intellectual development of individuals, upon home life, and upon public opinion. Its great increase and improvement may be regarded as one of the most important signs of the times."[8] For present-day audiences, who have been brought up in an age in which the radio and television have taken over the place of the written media as the most important manipulators of public opinion, it may be difficult to appreciate the influential role which magazines had in the nineteenth century. However, the views on topical issues which were vented in the contributions published in these magazines were instrumental in forming the opinion of the general public. A survey of the views on the position of women, in and outside

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[7] The American magazine industry was a booming, if at times a somewhat unstable, industry. Frank Mott's survey starts in 1741, the year when the first two American magazines were issued. There was a veritable explosion of new magazines between 1825 and 1850; their numbers increased from about 100 in 1825 to about 600 in 1850. The Civil War interrupted a further explosive growth of the magazine industry, but in the years immediately following the Civil War, there was another boom in magazines. Mott estimates that the number of periodicals multiplied more than four and a half times in two decades, from 700 in 1865 to 3,300 by 1885. Although the circulation figures of the time are rather unreliable in an absolute sense, they were undoubtedly growing. Between 1885 and 1905, an estimated 7,500 periodicals were founded, but about half of them were discontinued or merged in that same twenty-year period. By 1905 there were about 6,000 periodicals.

[8] *Andover Review* 5.18 (August 1892): 154, cited in Mott 4, 14.

marriage, will therefore give us an idea of the frame of reference of the readers of the novels and short stories in which related topics were addressed.

Women formed an immensely important special interest group targeted by publishers. They "became the primary concern, at times approaching an obsession, of publishers and editors" (Tebbel & Zuckerman, 27). Almost from the beginning of the American periodical industry, a growing number of magazines were directed specifically at women readers. The early women's magazines had an important function in the dissemination of what patriarchal society thought should be the ideals of a nineteenth-century American woman. As such they influenced the development of fiction that was aimed at women readers and confirmed the ideal of the 'True Woman.' In her valuable study "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," Barbara Welter summarizes the general opinion on what constituted a 'True Woman' in the mid-nineteenth century:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.[9]

According to Tebbel and Zuckerman, the early women's magazines served a dual function: "On the one hand, they encouraged women to read more – not a difficult task since it was one of the relatively few occupations sanctioned by patriarchal society – and on the other hand, they offered an outlet for the growing number of women writers who were beginning to dominate the expanding market for romantic fiction" (Tebbel & Zuckerman, 27). Reading may have been considered an acceptable pastime for the 'True Woman,' but it was only sanctioned when limited to writings which were considered suitable. "Here she faced a bewildering array of advice" (Welter, 165). Novels were generally considered dangerous, unless written by morally acceptable authors; history books were thought to be edifying, but "religious biography was best."[10]

One of the most typical and exemplary magazines aimed at women readers was *Godey's Lady's Book.* The editorial qualities of Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale (1788-1879), who was its editor and an important and prolific contributor from 1837 until 1877, made *Godey's* the most successful American women's magazine of the nineteenth century. She filled its pages with "articles on

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[9] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 132. Welter bases her conclusions on a survey of an impressive number of women's magazines published during the period 1820-1860, as well as a wide selection of gift books, religious tracts and sermons, and nineteenth-century cookbooks.

[10] R.C. Waterston, *Thoughts on Moral and Spiritual Culture* (Boston, 1842) 101; cited in Welter, 166.

history and travel, music and art, famous women, health, the care of children, and cooking," and gave ample opportunity to the literary products of women writers, both promising newcomers and popular and established writers. The magazine also addressed personal and homely issues and thereby created a relationship with its readers which was "singularly intimate" (Mott 1, 580). Mrs. Hale was a strong believer in the improvement of female education, but she also thought that woman's place was the domestic realm. In one of her editorials she wrote: "Remember that woman must *influence* while man *governs*, and that their duties, though equal in dignity and importance, can never be *identical*. Like the influence of the sun and air on the plant, both must unite in perfecting society; and which is of paramount value can never be settled."[11] Mrs. Hale and her magazine were important vehicles for the accepted views on women's role in patriarchal society and it owed much of its popularity to the fact "[t]here was nothing in *Godey's* contents that presented any significant challenges to the status quo" (Tebbel & Zuckerman, 35).

The decades after the Civil War saw the emergence of a number of suffrage periodicals, such as the *Woman's Journal*, but they never achieved a large circulation. On the other hand the more popular new women's magazines, such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which replaced *Godey's* in the final decades of the nineteenth century, were equally powerful in their influence on women to resist change. The prevailing image of women which was created in the fiction published in these new magazines was equally conventional as that in the older woman's magazines. Although the mid-century ideal of the 'True Woman' had waned, the "traditional good-hearted, self-sacrificing woman who embraces her 'natural' role as wife and mother is central to this fiction and is presented as the model of feminine virtue."[12] The dominant function of the wide-circulation women's magazines in nineteenth-century America, then, was to confirm and underline the prevailing ideas about the role of women in society. This is a role which women's magazines seem to have played ever since, and not only in America. Even though the image of the ideal woman has kept changing, the popular press aimed at women has usually not been a driving force behind this change.

Women were not only an important target audience for and subject in women's magazines, "they were endlessly discussed in the pages of more general periodicals" (Tebbel & Zuckerman, 27). As I explained in the opening section of this chapter, I have chosen to limit my survey of articles by women writers on the role of women in marriage and related issues to those which appeared in one of the leading periodicals of the period, the *North American Review*, which was established in 1815 and which continues to be published to this day. It was modelled on the great English quarterlies and in the first sixty years of its existence enjoyed a reputation as a sound and scholarly, if somewhat dull journal, which was very much associated with Harvard College

[11] Sarah Josepha Hale, *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1846; cited in Tebbel & Zuckerman, 34; Hale's italics.

[12] Patricia Searles and Janet Mickish, "'A Thoroughbred Girl': Images of Female Gender Role in Turn-of-the-Century Mass Media," *Women's Studies* 3 (1984): 263.

and Boston society. In 1877 a new editor, Allan Thorndike Rice, changed it into a bi-monthly and later a monthly magazine and moved its operations to New York. But more important were the changes he made to the magazine's contents. As Mott says:

> Within a year or two the *North American* became a free forum, welcoming all important expressions of opinion. It was almost as close to current events as a newspaper. [. . .] If the 'Old *North*' had been for decades dignified and retiring, it was now plunged bodily into the very maelstrom of contemporaneity, sucked into controversy, bobbing on the surge of the latest doctrine. (Mott 2, 250)

Rice presented radical and conservative views side by side and "controversy became the settled policy of the magazine" (Mott 2, 251). During the last two decades of the century, the *North American Review* published several articles on the status of marriage, on the role of women in marriage, on the qualities expected in wives and mothers, but also in husbands and fathers, and on divorce, which was becoming increasingly common. Women writers were important and prolific contributors to this magazine, which regularly invited well-known women writers to give their views on topical issues.

In the May 1889 edition of the *North American Review*, Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910), Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892), Marion Harland (1830-1922), Catherine Owen (d. 1889), and Amelia E. Barr (1831-1919) each responded to the question: "Are women to blame?"[13] They were asked to give their views on whether the nature and behaviour of women were the main cause for the growing number of unhappy marriages. Rebecca Harding Davis says in her contribution:

> Give to a husband and wife some genuine love, a habit of honest thinking and acting, a little leisure in their lives, and, above all, reverence for a Power higher than themselves, and there will be happiness between them, whether they live in Congo or Chicago, just as there would have been in the days before the flood.
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> Whether this kind of marriage is likely to grow out of the present conditions of our American social life is the question which concerns us all just now. (623)

Davis is not at all pessimistic, however, about the quality of American marriages. She is confident that the mercenary attitude is only common in the "fashionable, vulgar set in our large cities," but has not obtained a foothold among the "great, obscure, unpublished mass of people" (624), for whom marriage is still very much an 'affair of the heart.' She acknowledges that "the

[13] Rebecca Harding Davis, Rose Terry Cooke, Marion Harland, Catherine Owen, Amelia E. Barr, "Are women to blame?," *North American Review* 148.390 (May 1889): 622-642.

consciousness that divorce is easily possible, no doubt, often makes wives restless and insurgent under petty annoyances. When that is the case, it is certainly the woman who is in fault" (625). But she concludes by saying that "owing to downright true love, to conscience, and to the sound sense and large good-humor characteristic of the American, the vast majority of marriages in this country are happy. How can we decide whether the credit of this is due to the husband or the wife?" (626). Davis cannot be complimented on a thorough analysis of her subject matter, but she also refrains from severe moralism, and refuses to point the accusing finger solely at the female spouse.

Rose Terry Cooke is much more systematic in her analysis of the woman's role in the failure of a marriage, and she does not shrink from offering the reader a large dose of conservatism and moralism. Cooke begins by saying that men are also responsible for the unhappiness in marriages, but she continues with a ruthless attack on her own sex: "[T]o be true to the facts in the case it must be allowed that women are often seriously and recklessly in fault when the marriage relation is not only unhappy, but disgraceful" (626). She lists the wrongdoings of married women: "For, *first*, women often marry from wrong and inexcusable motives, and this first step in a mistaken direction leads them all astray and always downward; nor is the descent easy or agreeable" (626). "Again, *secondly*, women are unhappy in marriage because they enter into that condition with entirely mistaken views of their relation and responsibility" (627). "*Thirdly*, women make married life unhappy because the average woman is impatient" (627). *Fourthly*, women are exacting both by nature and education. [. . .] No woman, in spite of modern opinion and effort to that end, can fill a man's place in the world or at home" (628). "*Fifthly*, women are inconsiderate" (628). "*Lastly*, women are almost always jealous" (629; Cooke's italics throughout). Each statement is underpinned by a number of accusing examples, which causes Cooke's article to resemble an indictment. Her conclusion, not surprisingly, has something of the tone of a verdict:

> Let women give themselves to the cultivation of their womanly virtues; become patient, considerate, submissive, and gentle; cease to be exacting, extravagant, and jealous; let them consider that marriage is a condition that can be made blessed or cursed according to their use of it, and give their whole hearts to rendering it what it should be; let them take counsel of the wisdom which is from above [. . .] and act in this supreme and lasting position as Christian women should. (629-630)

Marion Harland, in her response to the question "Are women to blame?," makes an attempt at laying bare the cause of marital problems by venturing that the "whole system of marrying and giving in marriage, as it exists in this country, is founded upon a blunder" (630). Young women, according to Harland, are raised to believe that their lives will be a failure when they do not marry and they are misled by the endless devotion and indulgence of their

future husbands during the courtship period into thinking that marriage will be a continuation of this state of pre-nuptial bliss. But, Harland concludes, "[c]ourtship is play; marriage is work. The sooner women recognize the truth of the definitions, and act upon them, the sooner will the reproach be lifted from the honorable state and condition in which the truest and purest happiness possible in our sin-warped world is to be found – or *made*" (633; Harland's italics).

Catherine Owen agrees with Harland in that the expectations that the spouses have of marriage are often belied by the everyday reality of married life. Divorce, however, is seen as a possible remedy, even if this entails making the marital problems public. Owen argues that "it seems probable that we hear nowadays of a much larger proportion of conjugal troubles than we did twenty years ago, not because there are more unhappy marriages, but because they are not hidden by the dignified reticence that formerly hedged about the family life" (634). Significantly, Owen does not condemn divorce, but treats it as a modern phenomenon, which has become more or less generally accepted. Of the five women contributors to the symposium entitled "Are women to blame?" Owen is the only one who hints at the dangers of adulterous behaviour by married women: "[T]o provoke her husband into more active appreciation, the wife starts some mild flirtation, perhaps, and is confirmed in her idea of his growing indifference by the impossibility of making him jealous" (637). The other contributors do not mention marital infidelity of the wife as a cause or result for unhappiness in marriage. It seems that the notion that women would stoop so low as to commit adultery was unthinkable, or at least unspeakable.

Amelia E. Barr's article under the heading "Are women to blame?" is by far the wittiest of the five. She does not present views which are radically different from those of her fellow contributors, but her direct, if somewhat flowery language and her heartfelt indignation at the behaviour of some members of her sex make her article lively and amusing. "Speaking broadly, women are to blame," says Barr (638), but then, "the world as instinctively blames women in the divorce court as it blames men in the bankruptcy court" (638). Barr vividly depicts a few typical wives. Women who "find that marriage is not a lasting picnic" (638), and who refuse to believe in their husbands' love unless he is continually asserting it, become "dead-weights on men" (638). The superior wives, "these perfect women, cold and proper as a well-dressed tulip" (638), have even more to answer for, though, for they "have no constitutional tendency either to speculation or carnality," and "they wonder how men can commercially fail or morally fall" (638-639). "Babbling women, who, like Antigone, are perpetually calling heaven to witness" (639), are accused by Barr of a lack of "conjugal reticence" (639). They can only expect "civil tolerance, quickly passing into impatience and disgust" (639). And then there is

> the woman who offends not in speech, but in discouraging silences. She listens to all her husband's plans with that silent protest in her eyes which says plainly that she has no faith either in them or in

> him, and so takes every particle of ambition and hope out of his life. When he was her lover, she praised his singing and laughed at his jokes; now that he is her husband, she freezingly endures the one, and in pitiless silence listens to the other. (639)

Equally reproachable are wives who shun their household duties, or who live beyond their husbands' financial means, or wives "whose craze is for notoriety and excitement, creatures of headachy mornings, of afternoons frittered on gossip or shopping, and nights whirled away in hot rooms" (640). They "weary out very quickly the love of any sensible man" (640).

Barr was to repeat many of her views on the attitude of married women in her article "Discontented women,"[14] published in the February 1896 edition of the *North American Review*, which opens with her statement: "Every human being has a complaining side, but discontent is bound up in the heart of woman; it is her original sin" (201). In this later article, Barr also criticizes working women and women who have political ambitions. After all, if it is woman's original sin, why should discontentment be limited to married women? Barr accepts that women take on paid work when they need to earn their own living – "and alas! need is growing daily, as marriage becomes continually rarer, and more women are left adrift in the world without helpers and protectors" (208) – but she is critical of women who are "forcing themselves to the front in order to ventilate their theories and show the quality of their brains" and who "demand the rights of suffrage as the symbol and guarantee of all other rights" (205). According to Barr, women should remain "loyal to their sex and their vocation" (208) and should strive to spend their lives doing the task for which they have been created, that of being good wives and mothers.

Despite the differences in tone and justification, ranging from conservative and traditionally patriarchal, grounded in a firm belief in the Christian doctrine, to pragmatically realistic, the views of these women contributors are very similar. Rose Terry Cooke and Amelia E. Barr, each in their own way, advocate traditional nineteenth-century bourgeois values. The other three acknowledge that problems may arise because young women are often ill-prepared for the reality of married life, and Owen at least accepts divorce as a remedy. None of them, however, fundamentally question the role and responsibilities of wives. Once a woman has chosen marriage, whether or not voluntarily and whether or not based on false expectations, it is her duty to accept her new position in life and preferably to be happy and content, or, failing that, to be resigned to her fate. Women who found married life to be too restrictive and unfulfilling were essentially considered to be irresponsible and ungrateful. A woman's wish to develop her self and her talents was only thought acceptable if this did not conflict with marital and household obligations. It is significant that only women were invited to vent their opinions

[14] Amelia E. Barr, "Discontented women," *North American Review* 162.471 (February 1896): 201-209.

on this subject. The editor of the *North American Review* will have realized that any form of admonition with regard to marital behaviour would probably have more effect on women readers if it came from a representative of their own sex.

These articles show a genuine concern about the changing attitude towards marriage and towards the role of women in marriage. The fact that the subject was addressed at some length may be an indication that the opinions expressed by these women contributors to the *North American Review* no longer reflected the mainstream of thought on the role of women in marriage and that the symposium served the purpose of reminding women of their position and duty, at least as it was viewed by those that sought to uphold the traditional values of nineteenth-century patriarchal society, which was changing so rapidly and in which "the morals and manners of the marketplace had begun to prevail" (Tebbel & Zuckerman, 76).

The on-going debate in the *North American Review* appeared to deal with the marriage question in full. One aspect, however, was totally and conspicuously absent from all of these contributions: women's sexuality. Although the subject 'woman' was of increasing importance for the rapidly developing nineteenth-century medical and psychological sciences, the theories of scientists who took issue with the general belief that women did not have sexual feelings and needs and who advocated female sexual activity for women as a way to improve their general physical and emotional well-being were not generally accepted. The idea that a woman could want to form an emotional attachment to and could desire to have a sexual relationship with any man other than her husband was something that both the male and the female contributors to the *North American Review* did not, or did not dare to, contemplate. Or at least they did not do so out loud, in a public medium. In view of this, we can understand why the European female adultery novels and their American counterpart *The Awakening* created such a stir upon publication. The promiscuity of the female protagonists, who do not strive to be model wives and mothers, stand in marked contrast to what the majority of readers would have considered accepted behaviour.

A few months after the discussion on woman's role in the growing number of unhappy marriages, the *North American Review* held a symposium on the issue of divorce. In four consecutive editions, the magazine published articles by seven men and six women, in which they gave their opinions on this clearly very topical issue.[15] The male contributors, who were mainly representatives of the clergy, the world of politics, and the law, express radically different views on the various aspects of the divorce issue. The most extreme are those of

[15] Cardinal Gibbons, Bishop Henry C. Potter, Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, "Is divorce wrong?" *North American Review* 149.396 (November 1889): 513-538; W.E. Gladstone, Joseph P. Bradley, Joseph N. Dolph, "The question of divorce," *North American Review* 149.397 (December 1889): 641-652; Mary E. Livermore, Amelia E. Barr, Rose Terry Cooke, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Jennie June, "Women's views of divorce," *North American Review* 150.398 (January 1890): 110-135; Margaret Lee, Philip S. Moxom, "Final words on divorce," *North American Review* 150.399 (February 1890): 263-268.

Cardinal Gibbons, representative of the Catholic Church, on the one hand, and Robert Ingersoll, a well-known orator, free-thinker and agnostic, on the other. Gibbons states, in view of his position perhaps not surprisingly, that divorce cannot be allowed, and that the "first and last and best reason can be but this: '*Thus saith the Lord*'" (519; Gibbons's italics). An exception can only be made when there is a serious reason for discontinuing the marriage, adultery being one of them, but it is unthinkable that the 'guilty' party should be allowed to remarry. His opponent Ingersoll is of the opinion that "[m]arriages are made by men and women; not by society; not by the state; not by the church; not by supernatural beings. By this time we should know that nothing is moral that does not tend to the well-being of sentient beings; that nothing is virtuous the result of which is not good" (534). In a discourse which for an important part consists of questions that appeal to the reader's conscience, he cleverly invites his audience to go along with his reasoning and to trust only their own judgement.

> Is it possible to conceive of anything more immoral than for a husband to insist on living with a wife who has no love for him? Is not this not a perpetual crime? Is the wife to lose her personality? Has she no right of choice? Is her modesty the property of another? Is the man she hates the lord of her desire? Has she no right to guard the jewels of her soul? Is there a depth below this? And is this the foundation of morality? (538)

Ingersoll is the only one who does not treat divorce as something abstract, but who confronts his readers with the very practical consequences which church and state policy have on human beings.

After having given the floor to six men, the *North American Review* invited six notable women to vent their opinions on the divorce question. In the January 1890 edition, Mary A. Livermore (1820-1905), Amelia E. Barr, Rose Terry Cooke, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), and Jennie June (1829-1901) did so in a series of articles entitled "Women's views of divorce." And in the February 1890 edition, Margaret Lee (1841-1914) was one of two contributors who were invited to utter "Final words on divorce." Rose Terry Cooke, who indicates that "in all the affairs of the world, as well as the next, the Scriptures are the only infallible guide" (123), is (again) the one most severe in her criticism. Divorce is the ultimate undoing of a woman, when she is the instigator. She sermonizes:

> But if divorce for any reason is degrading and demoralizing to a man, what must it be to a woman? For her the whole world has no mercy; there is no forgetfulness of her sin, even if she repent in the bitterness of death; and deeper woe than the world's scorn awaits her, for I believe the worst woman on earth cannot be forever separated from her children without agony sooner or later. In the

> first whirl of passion she may forget them, but passion flies like a summer tempest and leaves devastation along its track. Her children's sweet, innocent eyes must forever haunt her; their frighted and saddened calls ring forever in her ear; and she will know in the blackness of despair that she has committed woman's unpardonable sin, for which society will allow her no place for repentance, though she seek it carefully and with tears of blood. (126)

Cooke neatly sums it up with: "She is worse than dead; she is divorced!" (127). Divorce is only permissible in the case of adultery, for "[n]o pure and true woman, no clear-minded, honorable man, could wish to live in such a relation one hour after its discovery" (124). However, remarriage after a divorce is abhorrent to Cooke, because it would amount to "consecutive polygamy" (124). And she is equally disapproving of a widow remarrying: "I think to a pure, delicate, faithful woman there can be but one marriage in her life" (124).

Of the five other women contributors to the symposium, only Margaret Lee, who is introduced as the author of *Divorce; or Faithful and Unfaithful*, can vie with Cooke in her radical conservatism. In her contribution to "Final words on divorce," Lee contends: "This evil, which for the past twenty-five years has been slowly undermining the morals of the republic, needs a radical cure. The remedy is radical. Let divorce be abolished" (264). It seems Lee did not even condone divorce in case of adultery, which was generally accepted as a just cause. However, other women opinionists were more liberal. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps stresses that the increase in divorces is due to the fact that society allows, or even stimulates, marriages that are doomed to fail in the first place. She condemns the marriage of convenience as a form of legalized prostitution and pleads for measures which discourage people from making an unwise match: "Make it as nearly impossible as human deficiency allows to *marry* wrong; and we make it all but unnecessary to ask if divorce be right" (131; Phelps's italics). Just how she imagines this to be done, she does not explain.

Mary A. Livermore takes a predominantly practical stand, although she is perhaps not always wholly consistent in her argument. She considers marriage to be "the most important and sacred institution known to humanity" (110), but if the married commit crimes, such as adultery, drunkenness, cruelty, or desertion, then it is better to end the marriage than to allow it to continue, for "[i]t is the very sin of sins to invoke the gift of little children into homes foul with corruption, where drunkenness gibbers, lust poisons, brutality deals murderous blows, and hate has usurped the place of love" (111-112). At the same time, she believes that the reasons for allowing a divorce should be reduced to a minimum and that it should only be possible by the verdict of a jury trial. But then again, she admits: "[a]n absolute prohibition of divorce cannot legislate appetite and passion out of existence" (113), and "[t]o prohibit remarriage absolutely is to open the door to immoral living" (112). It is clear to

Livermore that women have more to suffer from the divorce laws than men, and she makes use of the opportunity to plead for equality between husband and wife, equal ownership of family property, and equal guardianship of the minor children.

Contrary to what we might expect on the basis of her articles on the attitude of women in marriage, Amelia Barr has a liberal view on the divorce issue. She advocates divorce as a way of correcting a mistake, which she feels an unhappy marriage is. Whether divorce is always the proper remedy and a guarantee for ensuing happiness, is doubtful, according to Barr. Moreover, "habit and patience are great reconcilers to what is not easily changed. Many a pinching shoe has been borne, and worn, until it became an easy and perfect fit" (118). Barr disagrees with the interference of the church and ridicules the severe penalties on the breaking of marriage vows, proposed by the Episcopal General Convention, which form "a proposition smacking of the Dark Ages" (122). Although Barr agrees with her fellow contributors about the negative effect which divorce has on the children involved, she thinks it is sometimes preferable to having them grow up in a loveless home: "There are many cases in which divorce is the only cure for the existing moral depravement of the children" (121). Once a divorce has been granted, it should confer perfect freedom to remarry. This is especially important for an adulterous woman, Barr argues, because she would otherwise be at the mercy of her seducer. Whereas they are condemned outright by most of her contemporaries, in the eyes of Barr, adulterous wives are to be pitied, for "[i]n a woman adultery is rarely a calculating offence. [. . .] Cruelly tempted, perplexed and bewildered, when passion is stronger than reason, women do not think of consequences, but go, blindfold, headlong to their ruin" (120). However, Barr's attitude is also very condescending, for she depicts the adulteress as a depraved victim of her desires, emphasizing the emotional instability of women and their subservience to men.

Barr strikes a very different tone in "Flirting Wives," the article which I cited in the opening paragraph of this chapter. Here she reproaches "women who make marriage the cloak for much profitable post-nuptial flirtation" (69). It is a type of behaviour which has become all too common, according to Barr. "Without any exaggeration it may be said that wife-errantry is now as common as knight-errantry once was" (69). Barr does not have a high opinion of the constancy of young women:

> Can married women preserve their delicacy of thought and their nobleness of manner; can they be truly loyal to their husbands and to themselves throughout the different phases of a recognized flirtation? It is an impossible thing. (70)

Here the woman is not a victim, but an aggressor. She is moreover a danger to society, because she is unfair competition for girls in search of a husband.

> She reënters society with every advantage of youth, beauty, wealth, and liberty; released from the disabilities under which unmarried girls lie; armed with new powers to dazzle and to conquer. No longer a competitor for a matrimonial prize, she is a rival ten times more dangerous than she was. Setting aside the wrong done to the sacredness of the connubial relation, she now becomes the most subtle enemy to the prospects of all the unmarried girls in her set. (71)

In Barr's eyes, there is a clear difference between the adulterous woman who has succumbed to her desires and the frivolous woman who has only contemplated taking a lover, but who nevertheless deserves only "unqualified scorn and condemnation" (69). Both, however, lack the moral stamina, in both word and deed, that Barr values in women.

The women who were invited to participate in the public debate on these marriage-related issues in the *North American Review* were accepted as valuable contributors because of their sex as much as their known interest in or outspoken opinions on the 'woman question.' Magazine publishers realized that, when addressing subjects which concerned women so intimately, it was important to give the floor to female contributors. It would take away the impression that discussions and the public opinion were male dominated, even if they in fact were. Women writers did not, however, speak with one voice and they certainly did not all advocate women's rights. Unlike most of their male colleagues, they did not represent official bodies, such as the church or the law, whose official views they were expected to voice. Whereas most of the men were invited to contribute to this public debate because of the position they held in society, the women, who did not on the whole have an official public function, spoke as individuals. More so than their male colleagues, these women writers had to cope with divided loyalties. As women, they were expected to give expression to a collective desire for the improvement of women's position in society, especially by the editors of those magazines which aimed at inciting the existing controversy on this topic. However, their personal feelings and beliefs, especially their religious beliefs, might lead them to agree whole-heartedly with established views and to defend the perpetuation of the *status quo*. In their discussions on the role of women in marriage, this dilemma is evident. They protested against the mercenary objectives behind many socially desirable marriages, in which women were considered to be a mere commodity on the marriage market, and against the unrealistic picture of marital harmony that society tried to uphold. Yet, although they acknowledged that these practices often led to profound unhappiness of women in marriage, they hesitated or even refused to accept that women should be given the possibility to release themselves from unsuccessful marriages. One fundamental reason was that it was felt that society's rules and regulations should be based on those of the church and that religious dictates should determine marriage laws. The dissatisfaction with the

position of women in society had not become so pronounced in the second half of the nineteenth century that it raised a general female outcry for drastic changes. Although certain premises with regard to the position of women began to be questioned, the majority of women, including women writers, were not yet prepared to undermine the foundations of patriarchal society and to throw away the security and stability which it also offered to women.

3.2. "If a woman once errs": Fanny Fern's contribution to the public debate[16]

"A Model Husband," one of the many columns[17] written by Fanny Fern, opens with a striking epigraph: "Mrs. Perry, a young Bloomer, has eloped from Monson, Massachusetts, with Levins Clough. When her husband found she was determined to go, he gave her one hundred dollars to start with."[18] The column goes on to praise the magnanimity of Mr. Perry. Fern says: "Had I been your spouse, I should have handed that 'one hundred dollar bill' to Mr. Levins Clough, as a healing plaster for his disappointed affections – encircled your neck with my repentant arms, and returned to your home" (FL-II, 116). The lover, according to Fern, would "stand no more chance than a woodpecker tapping at an iceberg" (FL-II, 117). The column offers a typical example of the biting irony and outspoken criticism for which Fern's work is nowadays primarily remembered. As Jaime Harker observes: "For contemporary readers who find nineteenth-century culture smotheringly conventional, Fanny Fern seems an enigmatically modern voice – funny, courageous, and disrespectful."[19] However, Fanny Fern did not only write satirical pieces. She also wrote highly sentimental sketches and stories, which, according to Harker, "makes Fern so tantalizing and ultimately so frustrating, for alongside her subversiveness and her humor are anthems to the God of nature and impassioned apologies for motherhood and religion – and irony is difficult to detect in many of these passages" (Harker, 52). How then is one to interpret Fanny Fern: as sincere in her sentimentality or as strikingly modern in her satirical subversiveness? It is this apparent dualism which makes Fern's columns on marriage and on the role of women in marriage, including her references to female adultery, so interesting in the spectrum of nineteenth-century writing on these issues.

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[16] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from Fanny Fern, "Woman," *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio.* First Series. (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853) 133. Further citations from this collection will be indicated with FL-I, followed by the page number.

[17] I will refer to Fanny Fern's publications in newspapers and magazines as columns, instead of articles, although this latter term is often used for Fern's publications.

[18] Fanny Fern, "A Model Husband," *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio.* Second Series. (Auburn and Buffalo: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1854) 116. Further citations from this collection will be indicated with FL-II, followed by the page number.

[19] Jaime Harker, "'Pious Cant' and Blasphemy: Fanny Fern's Radicalized Sentiment," *Legacy* 18.1 (2001): 52.

The life of Fanny Fern, who was born in Portland, Maine, in 1811 as Sarah Payson Willis, was as unconventional as her writing.[20] The unfortunate end of her first marriage forced her to take up writing to earn an income. Although she signed her very first publications with a variety of names, she soon started using the pseudonym Fanny Fern, which she ultimately adopted as her own name.[21] Her first sketch, "The Model Husband," was printed in the Boston based *Olive Branch*, on 28 June 1851. The column was immediately pirated by a prominent Boston newspaper, which was an indication of the quality and popular appeal of Fern's work (Warren, 92). In 1853, Fern signed a contract with Derby and Miller for the publication of a collection of her columns, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. The book's success was instantaneous and tremendous, making it one of the first best-sellers in the country (Warren, 109). Later that year, Fern was contracted for two further books: the second series of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* and a children's book entitled *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends*, which both appeared in 1854. "By 1854 the combined sales of the three books totaled 180,000: 132,000 copies in the United States and 48,000 in Great Britain" (Warren, 117).

Fern's collections were not only a commercial success, they were also well received by most critics. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* called the columns collected in the first series of *Fern Leaves* "acute, crisp, sprightly, knowing," but "sometimes rude." The critic praised the "great delicacy and tenderness" in some of the pieces, but objected to "certain bold, masculine expressions, in others."[22] Less than a year later, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* wrote about the second series: "She dips her pen in her heart, and writes out her own feelings and fancies. She is no imitator, no dealer in second-hand wares. Her inspiration comes from nature, not from books. She dares to be original. [. . .] Her rapid transitions from fun to pathos are very effective. Her pictures of domestic life, in its multiform relations, are so faithful to nature, as to excite alternate smiles and tears."[23] And not only the Americans recognized the originality of Fern's work. In 1853, the English magazine *Eliza Cook's Journal* described Fern's work as "[q]uaint scraps, sometimes slyly humorous, at others full of pathos,"[24] and praised her forthrightness. Fern's work even

[20] My main source of information on the life and work of Fanny Fern is the most complete biography of Fern written to date: Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[21] Warren notes that alliterative, flowery pseudonyms were popular for women writers at the time Fern's career was launched, because they symbolized the kind of writing that such writers were known for: delicate and genteel. Warren thinks Fanny Fern adopted such a name on purpose to humorously underline the incongruity with her satirical sketches (Warren, 102).

[22] "Editorial Notes – American Literature," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* 2.7 (July 1853): 103. Cornell Making of America, 1 March 2008 <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/moa_search.html>.

[23] "Literary Notices," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 9.50 (July 1854): 277. Cornell Making of America, 1 March 2008 <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/moa_search.html>.

[24] "Fern Leaves," *Eliza Cook's Journal*; reprinted in *The Living Age* 39.496 (19 November 1853): 484. Cornell Making of America, 1 March 2008 <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/moa_search.html>.

attracted the attention of publishers outside the English-speaking world.[25] The collections brought Fern's work to the attention of an even larger reading public than she had been able to reach as a columnist and despite the criticism on her use of language, she was admired for her originality, and the sincerity and frankness which she displayed.[26] Her popularity did not wane during her life-time, although her two novels *Ruth Hall* (1854) and *Rose Clark* (1856) were not as popular as her newspaper work. After her death, however, her work was soon forgotten and Fanny Fern was only unconsciously remembered for a few of her one-liners, such as "The straightest road to a man's heart is through his palate" (FL-II, 273). Her work was only rediscovered in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Fern's work consists on the one hand of humorous, and at the same time critical, sketches in which she painted a scene or portrayed a certain person or character, or in which she commented on something she had recently heard or read, usually something which had irritated or angered her. On the other hand, there are the sentimental sketches and stories, which tend to deal with emotionally charged moments or situations. Throughout her career as a columnist, Fanny Fern tackled an enormous number of subjects. She wrote about things which were generally accepted subject matter for women writers, such as the death of a child, the sorrows of a widow, charity, religion, and domestic life. She also, however, addressed controversial topics, such as prostitution, venereal disease, prostitution, contraception, and family planning. For the purpose of this study, it is especially interesting to examine what Fern had to say about marriage. In relation to this frequently addressed subject, she also wrote about female adultery. I will limit myself largely to the columns which appeared at the beginning of her career and which were published in her two collections *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* and the later *Fresh Leaves*, because her early work is more strikingly original than her later columns, which were "as caustic and outspoken as they had always been" (Warren, 274), but which were by then less surprising and innovative.

Fern was extremely critical of the institution of marriage, and more specifically of the conventional power structures which lay at the basis of nineteenth-century marriages. She objected to the fact that marriage was seen and felt to be the most worthy goal in a woman's life and that young girls were raised with a rosy-coloured picture of married existence, whereas reality all too often proved to be a lot less romantic. In "Every-Day Follies" she writes:

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[25] Within a few years after its original publication, the Dutch literary critic Conrad Busken Huet translated and published a selection of her columns. In his introduction, he said of Fern: "De natuur heeft haar begiftigd met een teeder hart en een bijtenden geest, en de eenheid dezer tegestrijdige gaven ligt bij haar in eene zekere hartstogtelijkheid waardoor zij de dingen dezer wereld, de hatelijke niet minder dan de liefelijke, van de meest uitspringende zijde beziet en met de scherpste lijnen afteekent." [Nature has given her the gift of a tender heart and an acute spirit, and the unity of these opposing gifts give her a kind of passion as a result of which she sees the things of this world, the hateful no less than the lovely, from the most extreme angle and draws them with the sharpest of lines.] Conrad Busken Huet, *Uit Fanny Fern* (Leeuwarden: Suringar, 1858) iii. The translation is my own.

[26] In the later years of her career she published a number of other collections of her columns: *Folly as It Flies* (1868), *Ginger Snaps* (1870), and *Caper-Sauce* (1872).

> [A]s to marriage – months beforehand the young girl is wholly absorbed in the cut of the robes, adaptations of trimmings, and choice of laces, ribbons and ornaments. Not a thought whether the untried future be freighted with happiness or misery. And yet other maidens, as fair and hopeful, have had their matronly hearts wrung by drunkards and libertines, who promised, as solemnly as *her* lover will promise tomorrow, "to love and cherish." Other maidens have tripped smilingly over the paternal threshold to the altar, who have wearily re-crossed it *alone*, to die in the little old room where so many maidenly visions of happiness were conjured up. Other maidens as blithe have accepted a wife's lot, to be humiliatingly questioned, when the feeble mother of many children, as to the expenditure of every pitiable remittance . . . How many girls would marry if they stopped to think of all these things?[27]

In an earlier column, "Aunt Hetty on Matrimony," Fern has a character named Aunt Hetty vent similar warnings to young girls:

> Love is a farce; matrimony is a humbug; husbands are domestic Napoleons, Neroes, Alexander, – sighing for other hearts to conquer, after they are sure of yours. (FL-I, 377)

And this is just the start of Aunt Hetty's lecture on the horrors of married life. However, she concludes with: "But, what's the use of talking? I'll warrant every one of you'll try it the first chance you get; for, somehow, there's a sort of bewitchment about it. I wish one half the world were not fools, and the other half idiots" (FL-I, 379). Fern's Aunt Hetty realizes that her words will have little serious impact, since she is up against the moral majority which sees no reason to, or which does not dare to, question the basic assumptions on which marriage is founded. However, Fern herself was well aware of the fact that she had an immense readership, and she realized that her words would exert their influence and would contribute, in however small a way, to changing ideas on the relations of men and women within marriage.

In Fern's view, a good marriage was based on the shared responsibility and the continuous effort of both spouses to make it a success. She railed against guide books for young wives, which, in "Moral Molasses; or, Too Sweet by Half," she calls "[t]he most thorough emetic I know of,"[28] because they tended to place the sole responsibility for creating a pleasant home atmosphere with the wife. She comments:

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[27] Fanny Fern, "Every-Day Follies," *New York Ledger* (11 August 1860); cited in Warren, 239-240. Fern's italics.

[28] Fanny Fern, "Moral Molasses; or, Too Sweet by Half," *Fresh Leaves* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857) 210. Further citations from this collection will be indicated with FL-III, followed by the page number.

> "Always meet your husband with a smile." That is one of them. Suppose we put the boot on the other foot, and require the men to come grinning home? no matter how many of their notes may have been protested; no matter how, like Beelzebub, their business partner may have tormented them; no matter how badly elections go – when they do it, may I be there to see! (FL-III, 210)

The authors of such guide books should not be taken seriously, according to Fern, for they are mainly "sentimental old maids; who, had they ever been within kissing distance of a beard, would not abominably have wasted pen, ink, and paper," or "some old bachelor, tip-toeing on the outskirts of the promised land, without a single clear idea of its resources and requirements, or courage enough to settle there if he had" (FL-III, 212). However, Fern was well aware that it was a widespread opinion that wives should efface themselves for the benefit of their husband's comfort. She opened "The Tear of a Wife" with a quotation from a contemporary newspaper: "The tear of a loving girl is like a dew-drop on a rose; but on the cheek of a wife, is a drop of poison to her husband" (FL-I, 324). Her comment was vitriolic:

> Never mind back-aches, and side-aches, and head-aches, and dropsical complaints, and smoky chimneys, and old coats, and young babies! Smile! It flatters your husband. He wants to be considered the source of your happiness, whether he was baptized Nero or Moses! Your mind never being supposed to be occupied with any other subject than himself, of course a tear is a tacit reproach. Besides, you miserable little whimperer! what have you to cry for? A-i-n-t y-o-u m-a-r-r-i-e-d? Is n't that the *summum bonum*, – the height of feminine ambition? You can't get beyond that! It is the jumping-off place! You've arriv! – got to the end of your journey! Stage puts up there! You have nothing to do but retire on your laurels, and spend the rest of your life endeavoring to be thankful that you are Mrs. John Smith! "Smile!" you simpleton! (FL-I, 325-326)

Fern time and again made it clear that she was violently opposed to the prevalent ideology of domesticity and a social structure which made women subservient to and dependent on men. Her assertion was that, since it provided men with more advantages than women, the concept of marriage was unjust.

Not surprisingly therefore, men, especially husbands, often formed the butt of her satirical attacks. In "The Time to Choose," she responded to a remark made in the *Young Man's Guide*: "The best time to choose a wife is early in the morning. If a young lady is at all inclined to sulks and slatternness, it is just before breakfast. As a general thing, a woman don't get on her temper, till after 10 A.M." (FL-II, 261). Her reaction at once criticized the

image that existed of women and painted a domestic scene that she thought her women readers were probably all too familiar with:

> Men never look slovenly before breakfast; no, indeed. They never run round in their stocking feet, vestless, with dressing-gown inside out; soiled handkerchief hanging out of the pocket by one corner. Minus dicky – minus neck-tie; pantaloon straps flying; suspenders streaming from their waist[b]and; chin shaved on one side, and lathered on the other; hair like porcupine quills; face all in a snarl of wrinkles [. . .]
>
> Any time "before ten o'clock," is the time to choose a husband – *perhaps!* (FL-II, 261; Fern's italics)

And in "Awe-ful Thoughts," she rejected the idea that awe was "the most delicious feeling" (FL-III, 107) a wife could have toward her husband:

> "Awe!" – awe of a man whose whiskers you have trimmed, whose hair you have cut, whose cravats you have tied, whose shirts you have "put into the wash," whose boots and shoes you have kicked into the closet, whose dressing-gown you have worn while combing your hair; who has been down cellar with you at eleven o'clock at night, to hunt for a chicken-bone; who has hooked your dresses, unlaced your boots, fastened your bracelets, and tied on your bonnet; who has stood before your looking-glass, with thumb and finger on his proboscis, scraping his chin; whom you have buttered, and sugared, and toasted, and tea-ed; whom you have seen asleep with his mouth wide open!
>
> Ri – diculous! (FL-III, 107-108)

Fern at the same time made fun of these husbands' wives, for women by no means escaped her critical eye. Her satire of women was not so much directed at the women themselves, however, but rather at the society's ideal of women in various roles. In a number of columns, Fern satirized the 'model' wife, mother, sister, widow, or, as in the following excerpt, the 'model lady.'

> Puts her children out to nurse and tends lap-dogs; – lies in bed till noon; [. . .] – turns the cold shoulder to her husband, and flirts with his "friend;" – never saw a thimble; – don't know a darning-needle from a crow-bar; – wonders where puddings grow; – eats ham and eggs in private, and dines on a pigeon's leg in public; – runs mad after the last new fashion; – dotes on Byron; – adores any man who grins behind a moustache; – and when asked the age of her youngest child, replies, "Don't know, indeed; ask Betty!" (FL-I, 372)

According to Lauren Berlant, these columns formed "[h]er major response to the lure of the female stereotype," who spent most of her time idling, flirting, shopping, nagging, and generally showing the kind of behaviour that women were prejudiced to display, thus becoming "a grotesque slave to surfaces and form, dedicating herself to policing both her own and other women's adherence to rule while often becoming massively hypocritical."[29] Fern's criticism of women was in fact a criticism of a society which dictated women's behaviour by having unrealistic expectations and prejudicial views. Fern did not only use her work to expose and denounce these practices, but also to encourage women to assert themselves and refuse to adopt a sacrificial role. Although she was never formally aligned with the women's rights movement, she advocated that it was right for women to liberate themselves from the constraints of patriarchal society and stimulated women to strive for financial and spiritual independence (Warren, 298). Fern's satirical work may thus have contributed to the introduction of the 'New Woman' in American literature.

When Fern dealt with women and adultery in her work, she was primarily concerned with the social consequences for the (presumed) adulteress. In particular, she addressed the importance for women to have an untarnished reputation and the damage slander could do to it.[30] Fern consciously used her work to denounce these practices and publicly accused those responsible. "Woman" is her most impassioned attack on society's unjustified and inhuman treatment of women:

> If a woman once errs,
>
> Kick her down, kick her down;
> If misfortune is hers,
>
> Kick her down;
> Though her tears fall like rain,
> And she ne'er smiles again,
>
> Kick her down.
>
> If man breaks her heart,
>
> Kick her down, kick her down;
> Redouble the smart--

[29] Laurent Berlant, "The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment," *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 272.

[30] This had personal relevance for Fern, who left her second husband, Samuel P. Farrington, after only two years of marriage. He began spreading slanderous rumours about her in an attempt to obtain the evidence he needed to divorce her on the grounds of adultery. When he found none, he went so far as to fabricate it. Her family was scandalized and refused to come to her defense, which Fern greatly resented (Warren, 84-89).

> Kick her down;
> And if low her condition,
> On, on to perdition,--
>
> Kick her down.

> Ay! pass her by on the other side; speak no word of encouragement to her; measure not her fall by her temperament, or her temptations, but by the frigidity of your own unsolicited, pharisaical heart. Leave no door of escape open; close your homes and your hearts; crush every human feeling in her soul; teach her that the Bible and religion are a fable; check the repentant prayer on her Magdalen lip; thrust her back upon the cruel tender mercies of those who rejoice at her fall; send her forth with her branded beauty, like a blight and a mildew. "Stand aside, for thou art holier;" – holier than the Sinless, whose feet were bathed with her tears, "and wiped with the hairs of her head." Cast the "first stone" at her, O thou whited sepulchre! though those holy lips could say, "Neither do I condemn thee, – go and sin no more." (FL-I, 133-134)

It is not explicitly said that the woman has 'erred' by committing adultery, but the reference to the Biblical story of the woman taken in adultery emphatically suggests the connection. The Biblical reference also accentuates the sermon-like quality of the article, which reflects Fern's conviction that she was fighting for moral justice. For Fern, an innocent woman, presumed guilty of adultery and for that reason ostracized, was one of the most poignant examples of the victimization of women in a patriarchal society.

Her satirical work only represents one aspect of Fern's writing. Fern's collections also contain many columns which "validate sentimental reality" (Berlant, 274) in an apparently non-ironic manner. In these columns Fern praises matrimonial and maternal love, the innocence of children, moral uprightness and virtue in the face of poverty, hardship, and injustice, and the unfailing belief in God's goodness. She muses on 'a few of my favourite things,' such as the joys of a beautiful Sunday, listening to music outdoors, and the smell of flowers. Present-day readers have often found her sentimental work somewhat difficult to digest. Impressed by the frank and original way in which Fern addressed subjects which had been out of bounds for nineteenth-century writers, they have had trouble accepting that Fern often chose to employ such evidently sentimental rhetoric. As Jaime Harker observes: "To most feminist scholars, it seems incompatible for Fern simultaneously to lampoon the hypocritically pious and to muse on the joys of flowers, motherhood, and Christ" (Harker, 52). In her article "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," Ann Douglas Wood argues that Fern "waged a curious and confused battle" with herself and her writing: "she had two selves, two voices, one strident and aggressive, the other conventional and sentimental,"

and therefore "her earliest work reads like an exercise in artistic schizophrenia."[31] Wood points out that her first collection, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, is divided into two distinct sections. Part I is "packed with tales of lonely widows and dying and saintly children, who are described with sentimental abandon" (Wood, 18), whereas in Part II, Fern "is no longer drawing her readers into her sacred inner chamber of sorrow and sisterhood, but is lecturing them, hectoring them, from a podium" (Wood, 19). In the introduction, Fern herself calls the work "disconnected and fragmentary" (FL-I, v) and Wood implies that her "attack on two fronts was only subconsciously planned, if at all" (Wood, 18). It is not clear whether it was Fern herself or her editor who categorized the various columns, a large number of which had appeared before in various newspapers and magazines. The contrast between the two types can hardly have escaped her attention, however, so we must conclude that Fern was very conscious of the two voices that she used.

Other critics have argued that Fern used sentimental rhetoric on purpose to put across subversive ideas, "thus forwarding a feminist agenda" (Harker, 52). Jamie Harker suggests that these sentimental texts are more effective in doing so than obviously radical texts, for "[t]hey influence their readers not in spite of but because of their dependence upon traditional belief systems and structures, challenging certain ideological assumptions by conforming to other ideological tropes" (Harker, 54). Susan Harris argues that "[i]n exploiting and subverting a rhetorical mode not only closely associated with women's writing but also commonly held to be reflective of women's nature itself, Fern was actively challenging the prevailing nineteenth-century view of ideal women" (Harris, 112-113). The problem for present-day readers, according to Harris, is not that Fern's writing was 'confused,' as Ann Douglas Wood claims; "[r]ather, it lies in our confused reading. Our interpretative conventions have been inadequate for assessing just how deliberately nineteenth-century women writers were capable of manipulating the writing conventions of their day" (Harris, 112).

Harris focuses her discussion on Fern's first novel *Ruth Hall*, in which she recognizes the narrator's "continuous alternation of sentimental (or iconizing) and cynical (or iconoclastic) modes" (Harris, 115), which is "continued in the voices of other characters [. . .] each of whom reveals her- or himself as she or he defines Ruth" (Harris, 116). Fern's use of multiple focalizers and embedded narrators creates a "play of many voices" (Harris, 116) which expresses contrasting opinions on the female protagonist and her behaviour. Harris's analysis of *Ruth Hall* shows that Fern was adept at using narrative point of view to enhance her "subversive sentimentalism" (Harker, 52). In her columns, this "play of many voices" (Harris, 116) can also be traced, but not so much in individual texts as within a collection. Each collection is composed of both satirical and sentimental texts, offering a similar conjunction of modes to that which characterizes *Ruth Hall*. The columns on their own, however,

[31] Ann Douglas Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly* 23 (1971): 17-18.

tend to have one distinct, dominant narrative voice, either that of a satirical, dissenting narrator, or that of a narrator whose non-conformism is hidden behind sentimental rhetoric. Judging by the texture of *Ruth Hall*, this mixture of narrative voices seems to have been part of Fern's deliberate strategy, which appears to have been less confusing for her contemporaries than for modern readers.

In her sentimental stories, Fern uses the female adultery motif to stress the importance for women to have an untarnished reputation and to criticize those that question it without there being any cause. She felt the demands placed on women to safeguard their reputation were so stringent that they were forced to play a role, by compromising their feelings or downplaying their intellect. By depicting extremely dutiful and submissive women who are punished for transgressive behaviour of which they are guiltless, Fern implicitly criticizes the sentimental ideal of the loving and obedient wife.

In "Mary Lee" (FL-I, 83-88), for example, we meet a young woman whom the narrator describes in terms which stress her delicacy and honesty. She is "very pretty," with "delicate" hands, "slender fingers," and "clear blue eyes," with which she looks "unflinchingly" into those of her husband. She is "no coquette," but "gentle and yielding," and has "the generosity of a noble heart." She is beyond reproach: "[s]ingle-hearted and sincere herself, she never dreamed of treachery." In sum, she appears every inch a 'True Woman.' The narrator warns the reader that Mary's prettiness is a "misfortune," because she is married to a jealous husband. She is moreover said to be intellectually superior to her husband, possessing "a quick and ready wit, and great conversational powers." She consciously attempts to appease her husband, all too aware of "shoals and quicksands" in the "matrimonial sea," which she "studiously" tries to avoid, by "quietly" dropping "the acquaintance of gentlemen, who, from their attractiveness or preference for her society, seemed obnoxious." Her response to her husband's jealousy remains submissive, full of trust in his judgement: "To most women, his exacting unreasonableness would only have stimulated to a finished display of coquetry; but Mary, gentle and yielding, made no show of opposition to the most absurd requirements." Despite her efforts to satisfy her husband, the obnoxious Percy punishes Mary for her suspected adulterous interest by admitting her to an asylum for the insane, where she dies in an angelic pose, "with her cheek nestling in the palm of her little hand." Fern's narrator confirms the sentimental ideal of the 'True Woman' by stressing not only Mary Lee's innocence, but also her impeccable behaviour towards her husband. At the same time, the narrator warns women that this kind of behaviour is not necessarily rewarded.

In "Edith May: or, The Mistake of a Life-Time" (FL-I, 108-113), Fern wants to make a similar point, but the story is such a curious mixture of sentimentality, satire, and sensationalism that it is less effective. After a lover's quarrel with young Gilbert Ainsli, the heroine of this sketch marries the "ossified old bachelor" Mr. Jefferson Jones, who is described as "angular, prim,

cold and precise; mean, grovelling, contemptible and cunning." Edith, on the other hand, is described as "our peerless Edith [. . .] with her passionate heart, her beauty, grace, taste and refinement." Mr Jefferson Jones is very pleased with his catch, "firstly, because she added to his importance; secondly, because he plumed himself not a little in bearing off so dainty a prize." Edith plays the part of the dutiful wife, but suffers in silence. When Jones overhears a conversation in a restaurant in which he is accused of making his young wife miserable, he decides to put her fidelity to the test. He departs on a business trip, leaving Edith behind, who knows that her behaviour will be scrutinized and therefore decides to "deny herself to all visitors," until her husband's return, for "[t]here should be no door left open for busy scandal to enter." When the news arrives that Jones has drowned, Edith only mourns for him on the outside, although she does feel guilty, for "[s]he had not, in the eye of the world, been untrue; but there is an Eye that searches deeper! – that scans thoughts as well as actions." When after some time Edith renews her relationship with Gilbert Ainsli, a happy ending seems near, but like a 'devil-ex-machina' Jones reappears to confront the lovers and disrupt their happiness. Needless to say, Edith does not survive the ordeal. The combination of the sentimental rhetoric in describing Edith May and her trials and tribulations, the overtly satirical picture of her ogre of a husband, and the sensational plot twists, make the story a less sophisticated example of Fern's "subversive sentimentalism" (Harker, 52).

In her own inimitable way, Fanny Fern made a major contribution to the public debate on male-female relations in marriage. She did not shy away from dealing with female adultery, either in her overtly satirical columns or in her stories written in the sentimental mode. Her tremendous popularity demonstrates that American publishers and readers were familiar with the subject being addressed in the printed media and greatly enjoyed the way Fern wrote about women and illicit love. She clearly felt comfortable with employing both the satirical and sentimental mode, using them interchangeably, and sometimes even integrating them in one piece. In her satirical work, she was uncommonly outspoken and critical, and "[h]er brusque tone and candid air give the impression that she was saying exactly what she thinks – regardless" (Warren, 99). She was apparently voicing opinions that were shared by many – perhaps particularly women – who did not dare themselves to say what she did and who were so much in agreement that they did not counter her journalistic attacks or stop buying her work. Her satirical work may also have been so highly accepted because her readers also knew Fern as a writer of sentimental stories. It proves that Fern was not entirely synomymous with vitriolic criticism, but could also be 'feminine' in her writing. Her sentimental work may have functioned to keep the severe critics of her satirical work at bay. The frequency with which her work appeared may have helped to confirm this status as a dual-voiced writer. Her sentimental work was, moreover, not uncritical. She used her sentimental pieces to address an equally wide variety of topics, and to some extent the same topics, as in her satirical work and was

equally critical of the role of women in patriarchal society, even though the way in which she expressed this criticism was radically different. Whether she railed against obtuse and mean-spirited husbands and silly girls with rose-coloured dreams of endless matrimonial happiness, or whether she wrote tearful accounts of innocent young women who are wrongly accused by jealous husbands of flirtation and adulterous interests, Fanny Fern knew how to strike the right chord with her readers and to confront them with issues which were generally considered unfit to be discussed openly.

3.3. "Fell back on rubbishy tales": Female adultery in Louisa May Alcott's sensation fiction[32]

Although American women's writing in the nineteenth century was dominated by fiction in the domestic and sentimental tradition, the increasingly large audience of especially women readers also, as I pointed out in chapter 1, displayed an enormous interest in sensation fiction. The "highly-wrought novel," as Nina Baym calls it, was "the domestic novel's antithesis: a feverish, florid, improbable, melodramatic, exciting genre," which introduced female adultery as an almost inevitable ingredient (Baym 1984, 208). As such, this genre formed an important medium for writers to write about female adultery, at a time when it was generally an inadmissible topic in fiction. Its main practitioners in America were, as in Britain, women writers, and the most successful of them by far was Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth (1819-1899), who began her career as a writer in 1844 and remained popular until well into the twentieth century.[33] Southworth produced more than sixty novels, most of which first appeared in Robert Bonner's *The New York Ledger*, the popular newspaper which also published the work of Fanny Fern. Southworth's *oeuvre* includes titles such as *The Deserted Wife*, *The Discarded Daughter*, *The Missing Bride*, and *The Hidden Hand*, which was probably her greatest hit. The tremendous popularity and commercial success of writers like Southworth inspired Louisa May Alcott to branch out into sensation fiction, carefully masking her authorial identity by submitting her work either anonymously or under a pseudonym.

For some time scholars suspected that Alcott also wrote a type of fiction that was very different from the work for which she was known and admired. The character of Jo Marsh in *Little Women* was easily recognized as Alcott's literary alter ego and the character's ventures as a budding writer were clearly in part based on Alcott's own experiences. Inspired by the work and earnings

[32] The citation in the section title has been taken from a letter by Louisa May Alcott, published in Ednah Dow Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889); reprinted in Madeleine B. Stern, Introduction, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) xiii.

[33] Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 142.

of Mrs. S.L.A.N.G. Northbury, an overt allusion to Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, Jo tries to earn a desperately needed income for her family by taking "a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature,"[34] which she suspects will sell well, because "even all-perfect America read rubbish" (LW, 346). "Like most young scribblers, she went abroad for her characters and scenery, and banditti, counts, gypsies, nuns and duchesses appeared upon her stage, and played their part with as much accuracy and spirit as could be expected" (LW, 348). And like her august colleagues, she eagerly searched the newspapers for "accidents, incidents, and crimes" (LW, 349). Jo Marsh is very successful with her sensation stories, but the narrator warns us that she is endangering her character and reputation.

> She thought she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society; and, imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us. (LW, 349)

Jo saves her soul by giving up her writing career to marry Professor Bhaer and devote her life to teaching young boys. The novel's ending indicates that Alcott was well aware of the fact that women who earned money writing stories starring dangerously subversive heroines acquired a dubious reputation, both as a writer and a woman.

Apart from the clues to the existence of her sensation stories in *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott also hinted at them in letters to friends. In 1862, she wrote:

> I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compoze' & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare, so dont be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates wolves, bears & distressed damsels in a grand tableau over a title like this 'The Maniac Bride' or 'The Bath of Blood. A thrilling tale of passion.'[35]

However, Alcott's sensation stories remained unidentified as hers for a long time, because she chose not to publish them under her own name. It was not

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[34] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (1868; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989) 348. Subsequent citations from this novel are indicated with LW, followed by the page number.

[35] Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987) 79; reprinted in Madeleine B. Stern, Introduction, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* by Louisa May Alcott, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) xiii.

until the 1940s that it was discovered that Alcott sometimes sent in her work under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard and that the search for her lost fiction could begin. Most of her sensation stories, however, were published anonymously, and it was only after a careful study of the references to stories and publications in Alcott's private papers that a more or less complete picture of her alternative writings could be composed. The republication of Alcott's lost fiction began in the mid-1970s and so far 33 sensation stories, greatly varying in length, and two sensation novels have been discovered and reprinted.[36]

For many, the discovery of Alcott's sensation stories placed her known work and her authorship in a different perspective. "Never again will you have quite the same image of this particular 'little woman,'" remarked a review in *Publishers Weekly*.[37] Critics have argued that Alcott's sentimental fiction and her sensation fiction reflect two sides of her personality. According to Madeleine B. Stern, who edited the collections of Alcott's sensation stories, writing sensation fiction formed both "a psychological outlet and a professional satisfaction" (Stern 1995, xxiv) for Alcott. In these stories, Stern argues, Alcott could incorporate themes and phenomena which interested her, such as insanity, mind control, opiates, mesmerism, and the power struggle between master and slave or between the sexes, but which had no place in her juvenile and sentimental fiction (Stern 1995, xix-xxiv). Alcott's biographer Martha Saxton claims that Alcott was "tapping veins of emotion that lay very close to her skin" and that "[i]n her lurid stories [. . .] characters could behave with the violence, anger and ruthlessness that she kept tightly locked away."[38] Rena Sanderson states that the two types of fiction that Alcott wrote "reflect the author's subversive and conformist selves," and were a "response to the complexity of her ambivalent psyche."[39] As Judith Fetterley says: "Certainly the disjunction between the values asserted in the sensational fiction and those asserted in the domestic stories argues Alcott's ambivalence."[40] Rosemary F. Franklin refers to the fact that Alcott herself "claimed to have a dual self, labeling one the Saxon self, sweet and submissive, and the other, the Spanish

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[36] All of the 33 stories discovered so far have been brought together in Louisa May Alcott, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995). Alcott's sensation novel *A Long and Fatal Love Chase* was written in 1866 and first published in 1995. It was used by Alcott as a source for *A Modern Mephistopheles*, a novel which she published anonymously in 1877, but which had already for a long time been recognized as belonging to Alcott's oeuvre. According to Stern, it is quite likely that more of Alcott's sensation stories were printed, but they have not yet been discovered. Alcott's first known sensation story, "Marion Earle; or, Only an Actress!" was published in 1858 in the *American Union*. Alcott may have written more stories for this paper, but unfortunately very few copies of the *American Union* have survived.

[37] Review of Louisa May Alcott, *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern, in *Publishers Weekly*; reprinted in Madeleine B. Stern, Introduction, *A Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* by Louisa May Alcott, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (London: Macmillan, 1988) 3.

[38] Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977) 261.

[39] Rena Sanderson, "A Modern Mephistopheles: Louisa May Alcott's exorcism of patriarchy," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 5.1 (March 1991): 41-55.

[40] Judith Fetterley, "Impersonating 'Little Women': the radicalism of Alcott's *Behind a* Mask," *Women's Studies* 10 (1983) 1.

self, passionate and unruly."[41] She suggests that in her sensation fiction, Alcott could express her 'Spanish self,' especially in the creation of assertive, sensual, adventurous, and dangerous female heroines, which were the opposite of the pious, pure, submissive, and domestic ideal of the 'True Woman.' Margaret Strickland argues that "Alcott's thrillers examine the darker side of human nature and criticize the Victorian ideal of femininity as unrealistic and false."[42] Elizabeth Keyser "suggests they express a covert rebellion of women against male patriarchy and a demonstration of woman's wrongs."[43] These readings imply that, through her sensation fiction, we have come closer to the 'real' Louisa May Alcott, who was not the advocate of the domestic ideal that she was long believed to be, but whose ideas about sexuality, love, and marriage were in fact "conflicting and ambivalent" (Showalter 1991, 48). Alcott's sensation fiction is thus placed in a biographical or psychological, rather than a social context. Although I do not wish to refute these readings, I want to argue that Alcott may simply have had commercial reasons for writing sensation fiction and that she made use of the contemporary taste for this very lucrative genre in order to survive as a writer.

Alcott was apologetic about her pecunary motives, but she did not let her evident objections against the literary quality of her sensation fiction get in the way of her pragmatism. In 1865, she wrote in her journal: "Fell back on rubbishy tales, for they pay best, and I can't afford to starve on praise, when sensation stories are written in half the time and keep the family cosey."[44] Richard Brodhead argues that Alcott, in the course of her writing career, gradually discovered her qualities as a writer and that she skilfully adapted herself to the demands of the literary market of her day: "Alcott found her eventual identity as a writer [. . .] through the way she chose to situate herself in a historical field of writerly possibilities" (Brodhead, 86). In the period between roughly 1860 and 1870, she wrote sensation fiction at the invitation of publishers who catered to the large demand for entertaining fiction (Brodhead, 77). In the same period, however, she also published work of a very different nature. The *Atlantic*, "the premier organ of literary high culture in America" (Brodhead, 79), accepted two of her short stories,[45] and she published her novel *Moods* and *Hospital Sketches*, based on her experiences as a nurse. After the success of *Little Women*, which was published in 1868, she

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[41] Rosemary F. Franklin, "Louisa May Alcott's Father(s) and 'The Marble Woman,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13.4 (December 1999): 253-268.

[42] Margaret Strickland, "'Like a Wild Creature in its Cage, Paced That Handsome Woman': The Struggle between Sentiment and Sensation In the Writings of Louisa May Alcott," Domestic Goddesses, ed. Kim Wells, 1 March 2008 < http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/strickland.htm>

[43] Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); cited in Rosemary F. Franklin, "Louisa May Alcott's Father(s) and 'The Marble Woman,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13.4 (December 1999): 253-268.

[44] Ednah Dow Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889); cited in Madeleine B. Stern, Introduction, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) xiii.

[45] In 1860, the *Atlantic* published Alcott's stories "Love and Self-Love" and "A Modern Cinderella: or, The Little Old Shoe."

came to accept that moralistic stories for young adults was the kind of writing that would bring her the greatest reward, both in terms of payment and recognition: "[t]he niche she had walked into with *Little Women* was too comfortable to abandon" (Stern 1976, xxvii). Brodhead concludes that "the notion that the 'real' Alcott was the author of story-paper sensation is a sentimental reduction" (Brodhead, 87). This does not mean, however, that Alcott always disliked writing her sensation fiction; in fact, she found it a welcome relief from the work which the reading public had come to expect of her.[46] Alcott did not use the authorial mask of her pseudonym to challenge the existing moral standards, nor did she consciously use the rhetoric of sensation fiction to disseminate subversive ideas with regard to the role of women in patriarchal society. She accepted and exploited the conventions of the genre to introduce characters, plots and themes which were not acceptable in her other fiction, without fundamentally challenging the values and morals of contemporary society, as I will illustrate by having a closer look at three of Alcott's sensational stories: "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," "A Double Tragedy: An Actor's Story," and "Fatal Follies."

"Pauline's Passion and Punishment," one of Alcott's first sensation stories, was published anonymously in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in January 1863, and won the one-hundred-dollar prize in the editor's story competition (Stern 1976, xiv-xvi). Pauline Valary is easily the most vindictive and dangerous of the female protagonists of the Alcott stories discussed here. Pauline is a woman with a mission, for she has been scorned by her lover Gilbert Redmond, who chose to marry the "pretty, petite, and petulant"[47] Barbara 'Babie' St. Just, in order to secure a bigger fortune. Pauline wants her revenge, which has to be slow and painful. And so, as the story unfolds against the background of the wild and exotic island of Cuba, she sets her trap. She plans to arouse Gilbert's jealousy, by flaunting her new-found happiness with the young Manuel and by inciting Manuel to seduce Gilbert's impressionable young wife. However, her plot backfires and the story ends in a dramatic confrontation of the two couples somewhere high up in the mountains, where both Manuel and Babie fall to their deaths. "And with that moment of impotent horror, remorse and woe," the narrator tells us, "Pauline's long punishment began" (PPP, 152). Her obsessive desire for revenge on the lover who scorned her has resulted in the death of the husband whom she had come to love.

There is very little in the character of Pauline to endear her to the readers of her remarkable story. Alcott employs a narrator who paints a one-dimensional portrait of the heroine and who nowhere releases his narrative hold on the story. The comparison of Pauline to "a wild creature in its cage" (PPP, 107) in the opening sentence already sets the tone. She admits to

[46] Martha Saxton cites from Alcott's journal, in which the latter wrote in 1877, with reference to her sensation novel *A Modern Mephistopheles*: "Enjoyed doing it being tired of providing moral pap for the young" (Saxton, 341).

[47] Louisa May Alcott, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (London: W.H. Allen, 1976) 117. Further citations from this story will be indicated with PPP, followed by the page number(s) of this edition.

Manuel: "Yes, it is weak, wicked and unwomanly; yet I persist as relentlessly as any Indian on a war trail. See me as I am, not the gay girl you have known, but a revengeful woman" (PPP, 114). We may momentarily sympathize with her anger at Gilbert for having chosen a wealthy bride instead of the impoverished Pauline, but her retaliation is disproportionate. As she gets wrapped up in her revenge, the narrator stresses that she is becoming an exceedingly unpleasant woman. Her first confrontation with her former lover momentarily shakes her, but "[i]ndignant at her own weakness" (PPP, 126), she steels herself and continues what she refers to as "this devil's work" (PPP, 141), convinced that "[s]urely the powers of darkness are working with us" (PPP, 140). Even her faithful young husband Manuel is frightened by her transformation: "Boy, lover, husband though he was, Manuel saw and stood aghast at the baleful spirit which had enslaved this woman, crushing all generous impulses, withering all gentle charities, and making her the saddest spectacle this world can show" (PPP, 137). Although Pauline has the characteristics of a typical sensation fiction heroine, passionate, proud, and assertive, it is unlikely that many nineteenth-century women readers would have identified with her. She is too ostensibly wicked and ruthless to arouse understanding or admiration. Pauline may have liberated herself from the restraints of the accepted womanly behaviour, emblematized by Christian foregiveness and submissiveness, but only to lock herself into a behavioural prison of her own making. When she wrote "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," Alcott was perhaps still finding her feet as a writer of this type of fiction, and she had not yet discovered that even "blood & thunder" tales[48] can improve with the creation of more complex characters and the skilfull use of narrative perspective.

In "A Double Tragedy: An Actor's Story," Alcott employs a first-person narrator and two embedded narrators, thus presenting different perspectives on the situation at hand. The story, which was first published in *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner* in June 1865 (Stern 1988, 15), is set in the world of the theatre, both on and off stage, in which actors have learned "to live a double life."[49] The story's setting plays an important part in the reader's acceptance of the interpersonal relations of the characters. Since the theatre was generally associated with moral laxity, adultery was an expected phenomenon and its risk to public moral standards was acceptable as long as it took place backstage. The story's narrator, Paul Lamar, is not an objective witness of the story's events, but a fellow actor and moreover the lover of the story's heroine, Clotilde. It is clear that she has a secret which she is not ready to reveal to Paul. This casts him into the role of observer: "I did have faith and patience; but while I waited I wondered much and studied her carefully" (DT, 126). Despite his devotion to her, he remains somewhat wary. He describes the mysterious Clotilde as having a complex, unpredictable personality: she is

[48] See note 35.

[49] Louisa May Alcott, "A Double Tragedy: An Actor's Story," *A Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (London: Macmillan, 1988) 127. Further citations from this story will be indicated with DT, followed by the page number(s) of this edition.

"frank, generous, and deep-hearted" (DT, 126), but also possessed by a "bitter spirit," "a heavy melancholy," "an almost fierce unrest," and "pent-up gloom or desperation" (DT, 126). Clotilde, in other words, is definitely not the prototype of the 'True Woman.' Paul's analysis of her personality, describing not only her positive, but also her more negative qualities, suggests that he aims at giving an honest, reliable account of the events that are about to unfold.

Clotilde's improvisation talents are put to the test when one night, during a performance, she discovers a ghost from her past in the audience. It is her handsome and elegant husband, who is introduced as St. John, a name which may have been chosen to echo that of St. John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. We learn about the marriage of Clotilde and St. John in a scene resembling that in a Balzac story. St. John turns up at a post-performance party and is invited to amuse his audience with "a little romance" (DT, 132). He recounts the story of an unhappy marriage between a rich gentleman and a young Spanish actress, who runs off and returns to her old profession. The scene represents a shift of perspective from the lover to the husband, and the reader is reminded of the moral order and of St. John's rights as a husband. After yet another shift of perspective, the reader hears Clotilde's side of the story when she tells her lover Paul about the neglect, the insults, and the cruelty that she had to endure during her marriage. Clotilde presents herself as a victim and the reader is made to expect a definitive confrontation between the husband and the lover, fighting over the woman.

In the hectic moments before the start of a performance of, highly appropriately, *Romeo and Juliet*, Clotilde causes her husband to fall to his death. Paul is shocked when he discovers her crime and unable to forgive Clotilde, who is so disappointed in her lover's reaction that she decides to kill herself. Thus, the lover punishes his mysterious, passionate, and dangerous lady for her vengeful crime and for her attempt to liberate herself from an oppressive marriage. By assigning both Clotilde and St. John the role of embedded narrator, the first-person narrator and lover Paul allows the reader to hear each of their views on the situation. He also invites the reader to share the moral judgement which he ultimately passes on Clotilde. Running out on a brute of a husband is one thing, murder is something else. Clotilde gets her just deserts, while Paul makes sure that he is remembered as the righteous hero, by forgiving her in her final moments.

These Alcott stories do not ultimately challenge the position of women in society. If Alcott used her sensation stories to present "fantasies of protest and escape" (Showalter 1991, 42), she does not grant her heroines the freedom that they strive for. Instead they are severely punished for their transgressive behaviour. Alcott's sensation stories do, however, provide excellent examples of the suggestive treatment of women's sexuality, an aspect of sensation fiction that contemporary critics found particularly conspicuous and objectionable. Although there is little overt sexuality in many sensation novels, there is, as Leckie terms it, "a powerful undercurrent of the sexual body in both the sensation novel debates and the sensation novel itself" (Leckie, 151).

In "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," the heroine displays herself as a desirable sexual object. She is very aware of and consciously makes use of her sexuality to exert her power over men. Pauline's machinations are, however, as devoid of subtlety as Alcott's recounting of them. The reader is over-informed about Pauline's intentions, actions and the reactions they bring about and hence there is nothing mysterious or genuinely threatening about Pauline's sexual power. In "A Double Tragedy: An Actor's Story," the heroine's profession automatically places her in a category of women which in the nineteenth century was still associated with overt sexuality and impropriety. Clotilde is said to throw herself into her part "with an *abandon* that made her seem a beautiful embodiment of power and passion" (DT, 125; Alcott's italics). The fervour with which she enacts her theatrical roles suggests a capacity to be free of all inhibitions and to surrender to the sexual experience. With the boundaries between appearance and reality, between fantasy and deed, blurred, Clotilde is turned into a murderer and uses the stage as the setting for her final exit. Her last stage appearance ends in what resembles an orgasmic embrace with her lover, the narrator: "[S]he died, smiling on my breast" (DT, 147).

The sexual undercurrent is more intricately woven into "Fatal Follies," published anonymously in *Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine* in September 1868 (Stern 1995, 753).[50] The story has all the ingredients that can be expected in a sensation story: a French castle, two beautiful, but mysterious protagonists, an unconventional marriage, passion, suspicion, poison, and, of course, death. The story turns on a newly-wed couple, Monsieur and Madame de Normande, who invite the good-natured Doctor Baptiste Velsor to spend a few days at their chateau, where they individually confess to the rather gullible doctor that they suspect their spouse to suffer from an obsessive desire to hurt a loved one. It soon becomes clear that sexuality is at the root of the marital problem which Doctor Velsor rather over-confidently attempts to solve. The secret which endangers the marital happiness of the Normandes lies hidden in the husband's dreams, which clearly reflect his sexual anxieties. He tells the doctor about three consecutive dreams, which strongly suggest the couple's sexual incompatibility. The adulterous affair of which Monsieur de Normande suspects his wife is merely a symbol of his fear of Madame's desire for the sexual gratification which she does not find in her marriage. My interpretation of the dream sequence is clearly influenced by our present-day familiarity with Freud's theories on the interpretation of dreams, of which Alcott was of course unaware. However, it is likely that for these scenes she drew from her knowledge of mesmerism, which briefly enjoyed great popularity in nineteenth-century America, to create scenes which so mysteriously, yet vividly, portray the struggle for sexual dominance in the relation between the sexes.

[50] Louisa May Alcott, "Fatal Follies," *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995) 670. Further citations from this story will be indicated with FF, followed by the page number(s) of this edition.

Alcott became an accomplished writer of sensation fiction, a genre which she used for a number of years. She expertly and effectively employed the conventions of the genre, in terms of plot, narrative setting, and rhetoric. She also demonstrated that she knew how to use point of view in order to enhance the expression of her views, although her techniques tend to lack the subtlety of those employed by Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, as will become clear in the following chapters. Writing these "rubbishy tales," as she called them,[51] formed a welcome change from working on her other fiction and it proved to be more immediately profitable, since the demand for this type of story was large. Alcott wrote in the existing tradition of sensation fiction, and she did not seem to have had the ambition to use it in a very innovative manner.

For modern readers, these stories are mainly interesting because they were written alongside her fiction in the sentimental, domestic tradition. Critics have been eager to interpret this almost schizophrenic diversity in Alcott's work as a sign of the complexity of her personality and have seen her sensation fiction as a reflection of the adventurous, passionate side of a writer whose reputation was determined by the writings which she published under her own name and for which she became so well known. However, Alcott did not consciously use the rhetoric of sensation fiction to disseminate subversive ideas with regard to the role of women in patriarchal society and fundamentally question the values and morals of the society that she worked in. She exploited the conventions of the genre to create works of fiction for which there was a large market; her sensation literature appears to represent a pecuniary, rather than an ideological choice, one that she was happy to reconsider when she discovered her adeptness at writing an even more profitable type of fiction.

3.4. Conclusion

The different types of discourse which I have discussed in this chapter are examples of the ways in which American women authors used their writing to contribute to raising public awareness with regard to woman's changing role in marriage and in society. It shows that female adultery could be, and was, addressed in writing, but that its treatment was largely limited to certain types of writing, such as opinion articles in newspapers and magazines and literary subgenres like satire and sensation fiction. However, writers were expected to advocate accepted moral standards, and, if at all, be only mildly critical of existing social structures and conventions.

The debates in the *North American Review* reveal a deep concern about developments in society which added to the pressures on marriage and marital relations. Although the women contributors voiced a variety of opinions on issues such as adultery and divorce, ranging from severe condemnation to

[51] See note 32.

cautious understanding, none of them expressed a manifestly dissenting view. Even though in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as Frank Luther Mott claims, the magazine did not shy away from controversy and aspired to modernity (Mott 2, 251), on the sensitive issue of conjugal unhappiness and illicit sexual relations they tended not to take an overtly liberal stand and certainly refrained from referring to contemporary discussions on female sexuality (Gay, 109-168).

Fanny Fern's satirical and sentimental "Fern Leaves" columns and Louisa May Alcott's sensation stories feature radically different fictional representations of female adultery. Fern alternated between two contrastive subgenres in her columns to express her opinions on the position of women in contemporary society. In both her satirical and in her sentimental stories, Fern censures society's expectations and views on bourgeois marriage and the role of both men and women in sustaining them. Fern was comfortable using radically different ways of addressing her audience and appears to have aimed primarily at effectiveness in terms of her ideological message. The diversity of her work has puzzled some of her modern critics, but it does not appear to have troubled her contemporary readers. Indeed, as I have suggested, her sentimental work may have helped to make the unusual outspokenness of her satirical work more acceptable, if not less controversial.

For Louisa May Alcott, a professional career as a writer was one of the few options open to her to earn a much needed income for herself and her family. Her decision to write extremely popular and profitable sensation stories was logical. For modern audiences, these stories are fascinating because they represent an alternative side of Alcott's authorship. In terms of the use of the female adultery motif, however, they cannot be said to represent an innovative contribution to nineteenth-century sensation fiction or to voice highly subversive ideas on the role of women in patriarchal society.

It is important to realize that Fern and Alcott belonged to another generation of American women writers than Chopin and Wharton, even though there is some overlap in the periods over which their careers extended. Fern and Alcott were part of the group of mid-nineteenth-century women writers, who, as Elizabeth Ammons points out, "conceived of themselves as professional writers rather than as artists" (Ammons 1992, 5). By the time Chopin and Wharton embarked upon their literary careers, women's writing had entered a new phase. Not content to write only to earn a living, or to be occupied, or to express an ideological stand, women writers like Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton aspired to be recognized as literary artists and as the equals of their male colleagues. They consequently approached the topic of female adultery, which they used as part of their strategies to achieve this position, from a different perspective.

PART TWO

Chapter 4

An uncontrollable emotion
Kate Chopin's awakening to the female adultery motif

Since the rediscovery of her work in the 1970s, Kate Chopin has been embraced by the twentieth-century feminist movement as one of the first women writers who dared to give expression to women's emotional and sexual needs and desires. This admiration was primarily based on her novel *The Awakening*. Although it was seen by her contemporaries as a novel about a forbidden subject, female adultery, modern criticism has stressed its wider theme, the search for woman's true self. Emily Toth admits that, when reading *The Awakening* for the first time, she "was astonished that a woman in 1899 had asked the same questions that we, in the newly revived women's movement, were asking seventy years later" (Toth 1991, 9). Chopin's novel has almost invariably been interpreted as describing a woman's search for her identity, both socially and sexually, and the protagonist's death at the end of the novel is either regarded as the ultimate sacrifice that needs to be made in order to achieve real freedom and self-realisation, or as a means to escape the rigours of a society whose bounds are no longer acceptable. The novel is in many ways the culmination of Chopin's discussion on various aspects of the role of women in nineteenth-century society and her short stories can be seen as leading up to it. Although only a relatively small number of her short stories feature adulterous women, these stories form an essential part of Chopin's *oeuvre*, precisely because they share a thematic interest with her novel *The Awakening*.[1] However, it would be underestimating the quality of Chopin's short fiction to regard them as mere finger exercises. Both technically and thematically, Chopin's short stories broke new ground. She experimented with narrative form and addressed controversial issues such as the changing role of women in society and female sexuality in a manner which was novel for contemporary American literature. Chopin's recurrent use of the female adultery motif not only signals her wish to contribute to an important debate in turn-of-the-century American society, but also her ambition to be recognized as a literary artist, rather than as another 'scribbling woman.'

[1] Out of the 99 short stories known to have been written by Kate Chopin, eight can be said to feauture wives with adulterous inclinations. For a chronological list of Chopin's short stories, see Toth 1999, 246-255.

Chopin started her literary career as a writer of short stories, but she very soon branched out to novel writing with *At Fault*, which she started working on soon after the publication of her first short story. Her early work was predominantly in the regionalist genre, but she changed her literary course under the influence of two important sources of inspiration. On the one hand, Guy de Maupassant's work was a major source of influence on the development of her narrative strategies and her choice of subject matter. On the other hand, contemporary developments in thinking about female sexuality influenced her treatment of that issue. I will argue that Kate Chopin, at the various stages of her literary career, made strategic choices with regard to the genres and subgenres in which she worked, in order to establish and develop herself as a writer and artist, and that she employed point-of-view techniques to enhance her use of the female adultery motif as a vehicle for the expression of her views on the position of women in turn-of-the-century America.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I will discuss how Kate Chopin established herself as an author in the contemporary literary field. There is not a lot of first-hand evidence on how she operated in contacts with her publishers and readers and how she saw herself as a writer. However, her diaries, notebooks and letters, in combination with some of her published articles, reveal that she was not the intuitive and unambitious dabbler that she wanted the world to believe she was. In the subsequent sections, I will discuss how Chopin employed the female adultery motif at various stages in her literary career in order to contribute to the public debate on the role of women in contemporary society. The second section of this chapter deals with stories from *Bayou Folk*, Chopin's first collection, which have a predominantly regional setting. I will show how Chopin used the conventions of the regionalist genre to discuss the position of women in marriage relations in a tentative, oblique way. In the third section, I will elaborate on Maupassant's influence on Chopin's work. I will demonstrate how Chopin's use of female adultery differs radically from his, emphasizing a female, rather than a principally male perspective. I will argue that the choice of narrative perspective by both writers underlines this difference in ideological perspective. In the fourth section, I will show how Chopin used it to express her views on the role of female desire and sexuality in the gradual awakening of women to their own identity. I will suggest how this reveals her sympathy for the scientific discoveries on the origin of mankind and the principles of sexual selection, but also her doubts about the submissive role that had been assigned to women in Darwin's theories. In the final section of this chapter, I will elaborate on Chopin's use of imagery to enhance her representation of the sensuous experience of her female characters.

4.1. "But when I found out what she was up to": Kate Chopin and her authorship[2]

The general admiration of twentieth-century readers for *The Awakening* stands in marked contrast to the reaction of most of Chopin's contemporaries to the novel. The reviews that appeared upon the novel's publication on 22 April 1899 were largely negative. The critics were on the whole positive about Chopin's style, but objected vehemently to her subject matter. The review published in the *Republic* of 30 April 1899 opened with the headline: "Kate Chopin's new book is the story of a lady most foolish" (Toth 1991, 336). The *Providence Sunday Journal* wrote that Chopin had written a story of which the purport could "hardly be described in language fit for publication" (Toth 1991, 347), and the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* found that it was "not a healthy book" (Toth 1991, 341). The review which was published in the Pittsburgh *Leader* in July 1899 is now perhaps best known, for it was written, under the pen name 'Silbert,' by Willa Cather, who at the time had not yet achieved literary fame herself. Cather, who, as I pointed out in chapter 1, was the first to call *The Awakening* "a Creole Bovary," claimed she did not understand why Chopin had "devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme" and she hoped that next time Chopin would "devote that flexible and iridescent style of hers to a better cause."[3] Other critics did not condemn the novel as improper, but instead praised Chopin's audacity for taking on such a precarious subject matter and applauded her handling of it. The review in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* concluded: "It is sad and mad and bad, but it is consummate art" (Toth 1991, 343). The positive reviews were in the minority, however, and despite its notoriety, the novel was also not a commercial success.[4] Chopin was forced to come to terms with the fact that her literary success, based mainly on two popular collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, seemed to have disappeared overnight.

Chopin was both surprised and deeply disappointed at the negative reactions to *The Awakening* and decided to write a public response, which was published in *Book News*, July 1899, under the heading "Aims and Autographs of Authors."

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[2] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from Kate Chopin's public response to the reviews of *The Awakening*, in *Book News*, July 1899; reprinted in Emily Toth and Per Seyersted, eds., *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 296. Subsequent citations from this book will be indicated with KCPP, followed by the page number.

[3] 'Silbert' [Willa Cather], the Pittsburgh *Leader* (8 July 1899); reprinted in Kate Chopin, *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976).

[4] Chopin notes in her account book that she received $ 102 as royalties for *The Awakening* in December 1899. In June and December 1900, she received a further $ 35 and $ 10.15 for *The Awakening* and *A Night in Acadie* (KCPP, 142). This is a remarkably small amount, considering that she had been paid as much as $ 155 for the publication of "Athenaïse" in 1896 and $ 78 for "A Family Affair" in 1898 (KCPP, 141).

> Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (KCPP, 296)

Chopin's sarcasm is palpable, but her repartee is at the same time enlightening in other ways. She evidently tried to take the sting out of the critical debate that had arisen as a result of the novel's publication, which is why the response is often interpreted as an apology. Chopin playfully suggests that the novel, as it were, wrote itself, thereby attempting to deflate the indignant sanctimoniousness of her critics at her audacity to address topics which were considered unfit to be discussed in public. At the same time she appears to diminish her role and responsibility as author. In fact, Chopin's public response mirrors the off-hand way in which she generally referred to her writing, even though she had distinct authorial ambitions.

Unlike Edith Wharton, who wrote book reviews and more general articles on the art of fiction writing, including her own fiction, Kate Chopin appears to have had little inclination to write literary criticism or to write about her own work. Only two essays in which she talks about her profession have survived. In January 1899, the *Atlantic Monthly* published "In the Confidence of a Story-Writer." The other essay, "On certain brisk, bright days," was published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in November of that year.[5] In both essays, Kate Chopin speaks rather flippantly about her authorship. In the latter essay, she states: "[T]hough I have written many short stories and a novel or two, I am forced to admit that I have not the writing habit" (CW, 721). Her work, she alleges, is entirely intuitive. It is "the spontaneous expression of impressions gathered goodness knows where" (CW, 722). She claims to be "completely at the mercy of unconscious selection" (CW, 722), to the extent that she avoids rewriting and polishing her stories, "preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities" (CW, 722). The article suggests that Chopin was keen to create a certain image as a writer. As Nancy Walker comments:

> Throughout most of the time that she was an active publishing writer, Kate Chopin seems to have carefully crafted the self that she presented to the reading public, stressing that she wrote at home amidst domestic clutter and the tug of household responsibilities, and downplaying the effort she invested in her work. Such a

[5] Kate Chopin, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 700-705. This edition is subsequently referred to as CW. "In the Confidence of a Story-Writer" was published without the author's name. An earlier version, entitled "Confidences," was written in 1896, but remained unpublished. "On certain brisk, bright days" was originally an untitled essay; the title was later provided by Per Seyersted.

> presentation suited both the genteel standards of her social position and cultural expectations for a woman writer. (Walker 2001, 111)

However, her rediscovered manuscripts and some of her letters to editors show that she actually did a considerable amount of revising and polishing, and that, contrary to the impression that she wanted to create, she worked conscientiously and purposefully at her authorship.[6]

Kate Chopin's career as a published writer started in 1889, seven years after she had become a widow. After the death of her husband Oscar, there were financial difficulties to be overcome, but Chopin was successful in continuing her husband's business and managed to support herself and her six children (Toth 1991, 160-162). In 1884, she left Cloutierville, Louisiana, where she had lived with her husband, to return to her native St. Louis, Missouri. She appears to have decided to move, not because she required the financial support of her family, but because "life in a city provided Chopin with a level of intellectual and cultural stimulation that Cloutierville lacked" (Walker 2001, 50). Unlike for example her precursor Fanny Fern, Kate Chopin did not take up writing at this relatively late stage of her life in order to support herself financially. In fact, Chopin was never able to earn a living from her writings, even though she acquired considerable fame as a writer (KCPP, 131). Chopin's motivation for writing was primarily the artistic challenge that it provided, and in moving back to St. Louis, she found a social circle that encouraged her literary efforts and ambitions, an environment which Louisiana could not offer (KCPP, 130-131; Walker 2001, 50 and 54-55).

Chopin's choice to work in the regionalist genre was largely strategic. Nancy Walker points out that Chopin's first stories do not have regional settings (Walker 2001, 57).[7] Emily Toth refers to them as 'New Woman' stories and describes them as "romantic comedies with serious undertones, about women who are trying to define their own lives" (Toth 1999, 112). Walker suggests that these stories reflected "the challenges to convention that circulated in the intellectual circle of which she [Chopin] was a part in St Louis" (Walker 2001, 57). Chopin soon discovered that the topics which she chose to address were sometimes too daring. After "Mrs. Mowbry's Reason" (1891), a story about hereditary syphilis, was rejected by fourteen publishers before being accepted and published two years later, Chopin therefore gradually changed her literary course (Walker 2001, 73). Her years in New Orleans and Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, had provided her with enough inspirational material for the type of short stories which were becoming increasingly

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[6] KCPP, 245. In a letter of 1891 to R.W. Gilder, editor of the *Century*, Chopin writes: "I have further changed and eliminated passages that seemed to me crude" (KCPP, 203). In another letter to the *Century*, she concedes to responding to editorial demands in having "made certain alterations which you thought the story required to give it artistic or ethical value" (KCPP, 209).

[7] "A Point at Issue," "Wiser than a God," and "Miss Witherwell's Mistake," all dating from 1889, do not have regional settings. Chopin's first known story is the allegorical "Emancipation. A Life Fable," which was written as early as 1869, but remained unpublished during her lifetime.

popular, stories set in the disappearing world of the pre-Civil War American South.

Kate Chopin found a ready market for these stories in local and Southern newspapers and magazines, such as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, and *St. Louis Life.* Another important outlet were magazines aimed at young readers, such as *Youth's Companion* and *Harper's Young People's Magazine*. Nancy Walker suggests that "[w]hether consciously or not, she thus took advantage of two of the most widely sanctioned genres for women writers of her era: using the powers of observation to create 'local color,' and teaching young people moral lessons through fiction" (Walker 2001, 60). However, Chopin had the ambition to be published nationally, in newspapers and magazines that would reach a wider and more modern and erudite audience: "While Chopin appreciated the publication opportunities afforded by her growing local reputation and her network of St. Louis friends, she continued to look to the major periodicals of the Northeast for recognition of her talent" (Walker 2001, 59). In 1893, she made a trip to New York and Boston in search of a publisher, and she found the Boston-based Houghton, Mifflin & Co. prepared to publish *Bayou Folk*, her first collection of short stories, in March 1894.

Bayou Folk was reviewed in all major magazines and newspapers and was received well. Critics praised Chopin for the way in which she depicted Southern life, keenly observant of local habits and people and using the local dialect effectively. The success of *Bayou Folk* confirmed Chopin in her choice to write regional sketches and short stories, and she appears to have accepted the authorial image that came with it, at least for the time being. She also discovered, however, that this image had its drawbacks. *Bayou Folk* was labelled with terms like "quaint," "picturesque," "charming," and "agreeable" (Toth 1999, 149), and critics appeared not to have noticed that *Bayou Folk* contained several short stories which were very critical of, among other things, marriage (Toth 1999, 151). Chopin had strategically used the regionalist genre to address topics which were not generally accepted as literary material and to discuss them in such way as to enable her to vent criticism at patriarchal society. Her critics failed to comment on this and Chopin was disappointed at the shallowness of most of the reviews. A few months after the publication of the book, she wrote in her diary:

> In looking over more than a hundred press notices of "Bayou Folk" which have already been sent to me, I am surprised at the very small number which show anything like a worthy critical faculty. They might be counted upon the fingers of one hand. I had no idea the genuine book critic was so rare a bird. And yet I receive congratulations from my publishers upon the character of the press notices. (KCPP, 187)

Chopin was not only disappointed at the critical faculties of her reviewers, but especially at their refusal to discuss those aspects of her work which she felt were more important than her adeptness at recreating the *couleur locale* of the American South. Whether the critics had really failed to pick up on the subversive nature of some of the stories, or whether they had joined in a conspiracy of silence, is a matter of conjecture. I contend that the response of Chopin's early critics is an example of what I, in my introduction, referred to as dismissive censorship. Some reviewers may very well have recognized that Chopin's stories were not only 'charming' portrayals of exotic folk of the deep South, but that they contained a lot of implied social criticism. The fact that this was not discussed by the reviewers may have been a conscious choice on their part to ignore and thereby silence Chopin's rebellious voice.

A few months after the publication of *Bayou Folk*, Chopin went to the Western Association of Writers convention in Warsaw, Indiana. Her report on the conference reveals how Chopin viewed the regional writers with whom she was bracketed. The Western Association of Writers was a group of authors mainly based in Indiana, and its convention was primarily a platform for literary dilettantes. Chopin was apparently not impressed by what she saw and heard and wrote in her diary: "Provincialism in the best sense of the word stamps the character of this assembly of writers" (KCPP, 187; CW, 691). She turned her diary entry into an article, which was published by a national journal, *The Critic*, and reprinted in several other newspapers throughout the Midwest (Toth 1999, 156). In the article, Chopin berates the association's members for "clinging to past and conventional standards, [for] an almost Creolean sensitiveness to criticism and a singular ignorance of, or disregard for, the value of the highest art forms" (CW, 691). They do not realize, Chopin claims, that "there is a very, very big world lying not wholly in northern Indiana" (CW, 691), and she suggests that they had better describe "human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it" (CW, 691). The article stirred up considerable protest, to which Chopin chose not to respond (Toth 1999, 156-157). Chopin's disdain for her Indiana colleagues indicates that she saw herself as part of an entirely different literary tradition and world, one that was not limited to the regionalism, both geographically and culturally, which she felt dominated the literary South.

Only two of Chopin's early reviewers recognized the influence on her work of Guy de Maupassant, whose work she had become acquainted with early on in her career (Toth 1999, 149). She found in his work valuable examples of how to address subjects that were highly controversial, among them female desire and sexuality. As her stories became more overtly daring, Chopin recognized the need to look for more adventurous publishers, who appreciated her work for what it attempted to do and who had the added advantage of aiming at a national audience. She wrote to Stone & Kimball, the Chicago publishers of *The Chap-Book*, a new magazine which prided itself on its modernity and which was influenced by the English avant-garde magazine *The*

Yellow Book. She was very eager to get her work published by them, as becomes clear from a letter of January 1896, in which she suggests a number of stories would be suitable for the magazine: "These things have not been printed. I would greatly like to see one of them – some of them – something – anything over my name in the Chap-Book" (KCPP, 209). The stories that Chopin offered were not written in the regionalist genre, and Chopin evidently hoped that publication in *The Chap-Book* would help her to be recognized as a modern, versatile author, rather than as a regionalist writer.

The Chap-Book did not publish Chopin's work, however, and Chopin took her second collection of stories, *A Night in Acadie*, to Stone & Kimball's rivals, Way & Williams, who had started up in 1895 and wanted to publish "books that stretched the boundaries of what was permitted" (Toth 1991, 297). Increasingly, Chopin's stories were also accepted by *Vogue*, a magazine which quickly acquired a reputation for being non-conformist. It had been started up in 1892 as "a society weekly designed to serve wealthy New Yorkers" (Mott 4, 756), commenting on high fashion and other cultural matters. As such, it was one of the journals which "formed a special subset of the women's magazine market."[8] *Vogue* gave Chopin the platform which most other magazines refused her. As Toth observes, "[i]n the mid- to late 1890s, *Vogue* was the place where Chopin published her most daring and surprising stories" (Toth 1999, 172). The magazine published a picture of Chopin in December 1894 in their collage of "Writers Who Have Worked with Us," and in the caption she was introduced as a writer who was "daring in her choice of themes, but exquisite in the treatment of them" (cited in Toth 1999, 172). Out of the 99 original stories that Chopin wrote,[9] seventeen were published in *Vogue*, which is more than in any other single magazine. *Vogue* was her major outlet for her stories about extramarital love and female desire. In fact, four of the eight stories by Kate Chopin which feature women with adulterous inclinations were first published there.[10] Emily Toth suggests that the readiness with which *Vogue* accepted her stories about subjects which were too daring for many other contemporary magazines and newspapers may have led Chopin to believe that the time was ripe for a novel about 'guilty love' (Toth 1999, 173).

Chopin's decision to write another novel is in itself remarkable, in view of the lack of enthusiasm with which her first two novels were greeted. Chopin started writing her first novel, *At Fault*, soon after her first stories began to appear in print. She decided to publish the novel at her own expense in 1890,

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[8] Mary Ellen Zuckermann, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, CT, [etc.]: Greenwood Press, 1998) 19.

[9] Seyersted's edition of Kate Chopin's work (CW) contains 96 short stories. His edition does not include three stories ("A Horse's Story," "Ti Frère," and "Alexandre's Wonderful Experience") which were first published in 1979 in *A Kate Chopin Miscellany*, eds. Per Seyersted and Emily Toth (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University Press, 1979) and which were included in *Kate Chopin: Complete Novels and Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: The Library of America, 2002).

[10] Two manuscript account books, in which Chopin listed the stories she had written and their publication histories, have survived: the Bonnel Manuscript Account Book and the Wondra Manuscript Account Book, both named after their initial transcribers. They have been included in KCPP, 136-175.

when she could not find a publisher. Her second novel, *Young Dr. Gosse*, which she finished a few months later, was equally unsuccessful, and she destroyed it. Chopin evidently had the ambition very early on in her career not to limit herself to writing short stories, but to branch out as a novelist. In a letter to Waitman Barbe from October 1894, however, she concludes: "The novel does not seem to me now [to] be my natural form of expression. However should the theme of a novel present itself I should of course try to use it. I do not consider one form of more value than the other" (KCPP, 205). It seems likely that she was persuaded to write another novel by a remark made by Horace E. Scudder, who was the editor of the *Atlantic* and also worked for Houghton, Mifflin & Co., the publishers of *Bayou Folk*. He complained that her stories suffered from a lack of plot and indicated that he was not optimistic about the success of her first collection of short stories. Probably unaware of Chopin's earlier novels, he inquired early in 1897: "Have you never felt moved to write a downright novel? The chance of success in such a case is much greater than with collections of short stories" (cited in Toth 1999, 192). Although Chopin went ahead with the publication of her second collection of short stories, *A Night in Acadie*, which appeared in November 1897, she had also started on her third novel, *The Awakening*.

Scudder's suggestion shows that there was some pressure from the publishing world on Chopin not to limit herself to the short story. She therefore no doubt had commercial motives for returning to the genre of the novel. However, I want to suggest two further reasons for Chopin's decision to write *The Awakening*. First of all, Chopin may have felt that she had more to say about women's desire to liberate themselves from the social constraints that determined their lives than she could deal with in a short story, or even a number of short stories. Secondly, her decision to write another novel is an indication that she wanted to develop herself as an author.

The short story form, as I have argued in the introduction, forces the writer to focus on a single aspect of the adulterous affair and can therefore not give a comprehensive account of the reasons of the married woman to get involved in an extramarital relationship and of the consequences of her adultery. Possibly inspired by the European examples, Chopin realized that it was a subject matter eminently suited for treatment in a novel. In *The Awakening*, she introduces many of the elements of the 'classic' novel of adultery. The romantic friendship with Robert, which precedes the more clearly sexual relationship with Alcée Arobin, recalls Emma Bovary's first romantic yearnings for the young Leon, followed by her later affair with the landowner Rodolphe. The mirroring of the adulteress with another female character, as in the juxtaposing of Anna and Kitty in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, is accomplished by setting off Edna Pontellier against her friend, the mother figure Adèle Ratignolle. The role of the children in *The Awakening* is, albeit small, significant in terms of showing the adulteress's attitude towards her motherhood, and as such they have a function similar to that in other novels of female adultery.[11]

[11] See chapter 2, note 21.

In writing *The Awakening*, Chopin had the ambition to tell a story of female adultery in all its complexity.

Chopin wanted to shake off the image of local colour writer that she had acquired on the basis of her early work and earn a name for herself as a major writer, which meant taking on a major literary form, such as the novel. In *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse argue that regionalist writers favoured the short story genre over that of the novel, because they "sought to escape the conventions of plot so that they might be free to say something other than 'the old, old story' of heterosexual romance."[12] This choice "constitute[d] a decision to opt for minority status" (Fetterley & Pryse, 204). They moreover suggest that women who aspired to write a non-conventional story about their own sex were almost forced to opt for a form other than the novel.

> The requirement of plot had serious implications for what women writers were free to say in novels, since they were limited by what readers expected to find. Not surprisingly, these expectations of what constituted plot [. . .] were culturally conservative, privileging heterosexual romance and those female characters who could be imagined as participating in such romance – young, unmarried, but marriageable, and excessively feminine. (Fetterley & Pryse, 170-171)

The analysis of Fetterley and Pryse is confirmed by the reception of *The Awakening*. Chopin did not feel that in writing a novel as a woman writer she was limited to reiterating the conventional courtship story. Instead, she knew she had a contribution to make to the literary world in writing about female adultery, for which she had found inspiration in European literature. The success she had had with her short stories and the appreciation she had encountered with publishers, although not all of them, for addressing controversial issues explain why she believed that a novel about a woman who escaped from the constraints of marriage would be welcomed by turn-of-the-century America. *The Awakening* was published by Herbert S. Stone & Co., after they had bought Way & Williams in 1898. The harsh condemnation that befell *The Awakening* proves that she was seriously mistaken.

Chopin had embarked upon *The Awakening*, only to discover upon publication that her readers were not prepared to accept a novel which transferred a subject which was associated with the degeneracy of European literature to an American context. At the time she was writing *The Awakening*, Chopin was still trying to find a publisher who would be pleased with the kind of literature that she wanted to write and who could help her establish her authorial reputation. She did not have a permanent editor to advise her, not only about individual works of fiction, but also about the development of her

[12] Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 204.

career. She appears to have depended almost entirely on her own judgement and instincts, which were not always right. The novel's negative reception did not end her literary career altogether, although it probably caused Herbert S. Stone to cancel the planned publication of her third collection of short stories, *A Vocation and a Voice* (Seyersted, 182; Toth 1991, 373; Walker 2001, 137-139).[13] Chopin continued to write, but the emphasis was on poems and short stories, many of which she did not even offer for publication (Toth 1999, 232-236). She appears to have accepted that her ambitions were not in accord with the opportunities that the American literary establishment offered her.

4.2. "Quite unlike most American tales": Kate Chopin as creator of a regional story world[14]

The reviews of *The Awakening* almost all expressed dismay at the fact that Chopin had unexpectedly turned her back upon the regionalist genre and had written a novel about 'guilty love.' Chopin's literary interest in female adultery was not as new as it seemed, however. In her first collection, *Bayou Folk* (1894), Chopin already depicted wives who form attachments to other men and/or who are tempted to free themselves from their matrimonial bonds, a highly unusual topic for regionalist stories.[15] Chopin was aware of the public interest in nostalgically depicting regional civilizations that were in danger of disappearing under the pressure of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society. However, she wanted to deal with subjects and themes that were generally considered controversial, such as the awakening of female consciousness, and female desire and sexuality. Although the combination was unusual, regionalist writing provided her with a literary tradition that allowed her to explore these subversive topics without being too confrontational for the general American reading public (Seyersted, 80-83).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that writing in the regionalist or local colour tradition, with its colourful settings, peopled by characters with divers and exotic ethnic backgrounds, gave Chopin the chance to tell stories "based on idiosyncratic customs, folk character, and regional behavior" with

[13] Daniel Rankin, Chopin's first biographer, claims that 22 stories, written between 1893 and 1900, were to be included in *A Vocation and a Voice*, but no list of stories was found among Chopin's papers.

[14] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from a Houghton, Mifflin & Co. advertisement, which appeared in *Publishers Weekly* (17 March 1894), announcing Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk*; reprinted in Toth 1991, 223.

[15] The first of Chopin's stories which refers to an adulterous wife is "After the Winter," written in 1891, but not published until April 1896, in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, and subsequently in *A Night in Acadie*. In this story, it is strongly suggested that the wife of the story's male protagonist, M'sieur Michel, has left him, but it is not made explicit, which illustrates Chopin's reticence with regard to this topic. Chopin's narrator merely remarks: "Then, there are women – there are wives with thoughts that roam and grow wanton with roaming; women whose pulses are stirred by strange voices and eyes that woo; women who forget the claims of yesterday, the hopes of to-morrow, in the impetuous clutch of to-day" (CW, 181).

"almost scientific detachment."[16] Events that would ordinarily be considered shocking could be presented as part of local social relations and traditions and would therefore not excite the moral indignation that would be evoked if they had been associated with white Anglo-American society. "In Sabine," for example, is the story of 'Tite Reine, who lives on a small, isolated farm and is abused by her brutish husband Bud Aiken.[17] Her old friend Grégoire Santien takes pity on the young woman, who is but the shadow of the spirited girl he once knew, and helps her to run away and return to her childhood village. Despite its dissentient nature, her publishers saw no problems in including the story in *Bayou Folk*. 'Tite Reine's decision to leave her husband is justified, even in the eyes of nineteenth-century readers, because he beats her. And although Grégoire and 'Tite Reine plot her escape together, there is no suggestion that they are lovers, and at the end of the story they go their separate ways. The overtly rural setting of "the big lonesome parish of Sabine"[18] and the rather one-dimensional characterization of the story's protagonists, who all speak in heavy dialect, moreover place the events in a world that was so far removed from that of Chopin's reading public that they were unlikely to view it as an attack on the values of their own society.

A local colourist, Gilbert and Gubar argue, is "in a sense a sort of ethnologist or cultural anthropologist" (Gilbert & Gubar, 90). In *Competing Voices: The American Novel, 1865-1914*, Susan V. Donaldson looks at this resemblance in more detail. She observes a similarity between local colour fiction and ethnological exhibitions:

> What both ethnological collections and local color fiction shared was a dynamic demarcating the boundaries between the ordinary and the strange, the normative and the eccentric, and above all, spectators and spectacles. [. . .] By definition the artifacts on display and the local color stories being read represented everything that the audience was not, whether regional, traditional, quaint, foreign, or ethnic. For the era's emerging middle class, whose boundaries and self-definition remained far from certain, that sense of difference, figured in the content and form of both ethnological collections and local color fiction, was distinctly reassuring.[19]

One of the functions of regional literature of the late nineteenth century, then, was to reinforce white middle-class values. By portraying regional characters

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[16] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire," *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century.* Volume 2. *Sexchanges* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 90.

[17] The name 'Tite Reine' is derived from the French 'petite reine.' It is tempting to think that readers who were less familiar with the Southern dialect would read the name as 'tight rein,' but there is no indication that they did.

[18] CW, 205. Subsequent citations from Chopin's short stories are indicated by an abbreviation of the story's title, followed by the page number in this edition.

[19] Susan V. Donaldson, *Competing Voices: The American Novel, 1865-1914* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 44.

as 'quaint,' 'exotic,' or 'alien,' the differences between the readers and the characters they read about were magnified and this "helped tell white middle-class Americans who and what they were by presenting them with spectacles of what they were not" (Donaldson, 50). This was strengthened by a narrative convention "offering the middle-class reader a reassuring self-reflection in the figure of the narrator, sometimes cast in the first person and sometimes in the third person but always implicitly white, urban, and thus allied with the norm" (Donaldson, 51). It is, however, important to recognize that this represents a rather unsubtle literary use of the regional world and that, for a fuller appreciation of its effects, we need to differentiate between the local colour and the regionalist genre.

These terms are often used interchangeably to denote literary subgenres which are concerned with "rendering true and faithful accounts of local life."[20] However, critics like Judith Fetterley, Marjorie Pryse, John A. Staunton and others observe a distinction between the two. Local colour and regionalist writers appear to have different aims, although they tend to share a preference for the short story, the picturesque setting, the use of transliterated and phonetically rendered dialect, and "the evocation of alien customs and systems of power" (Staunton, 206). Local colour writing "marks and contains the excesses of regional difference," which are presented in "a framing narrative in standard written English that suggests the comfort and security of a carefully modulated Eastern cultural vision" (Staunton, 207-208). One of the most significant features of regionalism, on the other hand, is the narrator's empathy with the story world: "[T]he narrator's stance of careful listening fosters an affective connection between the reader of the work and the lives the work depicts" (Fetterley & Pryse, 107). Because regionalist narrators "identify with rather than distance themselves from the material of their stories, regionalist texts allow the reader to view the regional speaker as subject and not as object" (Fetterley & Pryse, 107). Whereas the local colour narrator is typically an outsider, looking in, the regionalist narrator is an insider, who introduces the reader into an unfamiliar world and who "models empathic response for readers and instructs them in the value of that response while at the same time [the narrator] devises strategies for overcoming its readers' anticipated resistance" (Fetterley & Pryse, 107). Regionalism and local colour writing thus "offer markedly different representations of local life, which have wide-ranging consequences for how we see individual characters and how they see themselves in relation to each other" (Staunton, 207). Based on this delineation, both Staunton and Fetterley and Pryse prefer to see Chopin as a regionalist writer, rather than as a local colour writer. Whereas I agree with their classification, I will argue that, although Chopin succeeds in creating an empathic relationship between narrator and reader, she creates a different kind of contrast. Chopin de-emphasizes the opposition between the reader's

[20] John A. Staunton, "Kate Chopin's 'One Story': Casting a Shadowy Glance on the Ethics of Regionalism," *Studies in American Fiction* 28.2 (2000): 205.

world and the regional world, in order to accentuate the different spheres *within* her regional world, those of men and of women.

Nancy Walker claims that Chopin rarely "employed a device used commonly by her contemporaries to underscore the difference between the reader and 'spectacle': a narrative voice representative of the class and perspective of the reader, who introduces the 'different' characters and scenes and thus serves as a genteel barrier between the 'normal' and the 'odd'" (Walker 2001, 90). "More commonly," according to Walker, "Chopin employs no mediating narrative perspective at all, instead entering directly into the world her characters inhabit and take for granted, and leaving to the reader the task of becoming oriented there" (Walker 2001, 91). She "thus positions herself as an inhabitant of the culture she depicts in her fiction, not a visitor or observer who wishes to point out the picturesque and exotic features of the region to underscore its difference from the rest of American society" (Walker 2001, 92). Walker's analysis of Chopin's narrative perspective is in line with the analysis of the regionalist writer's use of the narrator, as given by Fetterley and Pryse. Interestingly, Walker almost automatically appears to equate the author with the narrator, an equation which, according to Susan Lanser, is not unconventional and is justifiable (Lanser, 151). Indeed, Chopin's third-person narrators, the most commonly used type in her work, usually do not occupy a prominent position in her stories and they present the story world with a large degree of matter-of-fact acceptance, thus minimizing the contrast between the depicted regional world and that of the reader. Instead, Chopin emphasizes contrasting spheres *within* the story world.

I will argue that the role which in local colour fiction is traditionally occupied by the narrator, that of outsider to the depicted regional world, is instead given to the male protagonist. In stories like "A Lady of Bayou St. John" (1893) and "Madame Célestin's Divorce" (1893), the male protagonist has, as a result of his background or social stature, to some extent always remained an outsider. Through his relationship with the female protagonist, who is a typical representative of the regional world, he is confident that he can absorb its social and moral values. It is characteristic of Chopin's use of irony, however, that in the course of the story he discovers that he is, and will remain, an outsider to her personal sphere.[21] My analysis of these regionalist stories reveals that it is through the narrator's subtle manipulation of the male protagonist that Chopin seeks to cast alternative perspectives on moral values.

A Lady of Bayou St. John

The strategic use of the male protagonist in Chopin's regionalist female adultery stories is exemplified in the role of the character Sépincourt in "A Lady

[21] Chopin also used this technique in a later story with the female adultery motif, "Athenaïse," which I will not discuss in detail. This story was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1895 and later included in *A Night in Acadie*.

of Bayou St. John." Sépincourt is the French neighbour of the beautiful and young Madame Delisle, who spends her days and nights alone, as her husband is fighting at a Civil War front. Sépincourt is cast as the outsider. The war has little impact on him: "He shrugged his shoulders over this strife between brothers, this quarrel which was none of his; and he resented it chiefly upon the ground that it made life uncomfortable" (LBSJ, 298). He finds diversion in keeping Madame Delisle company and acting as her window to the outside world, bringing her news from the war, which they talk about "listlessly, between long intervals of silence" (LBSJ, 299). Her youth and emotional immaturity make her an easy prey to Sépincourt's amorous attention. The "quiver of his sensitive lip and the quick beating of a swollen vein in his brown throat" (LBSJ, 299), as he suggests they run away to Paris together, both frighten and excite her. He sends her a passionate letter, which convinces her of the honesty of his feelings: "To her it was a voice from the unknown, like music, awaking in her a delicious tumult that seized and held possession of her whole being" (LBSJ, 300). Madame Delisle thus becomes one of the first Chopin characters who appears ready to give in to her adulterous passion, but only momentarily.

The romance comes to a sudden end with the news of the death of Madame Delisle's husband. Her surrender to desire was brief. "Chance willed it otherwise" (LBSJ, 300), the narrator tells us. When, after a decent lapse of time, Sépincourt visits the young widow to renew his proposal, he discovers that he has no place in her thoughts any more. She has chosen to play the role of the grieving widow for the rest of her life, feeding on the memories of a husband, who, she admits, "has never been so living to me as he is now" (LBSJ, 301). This comes as a shock to Sépincourt: "Many days after that Sépincourt spent in the fruitless mental effort of trying to comprehend that psychological enigma, a woman's heart" (LBSJ, 302). But is it as unexpected for the reader?

The narrator has throughout the story subtly undermined Sépincourt's credibility and exposed him as the superficial stereotype of the ardent admirer. He has no interest in the war that is raging the country and consequently has little empathy for the emotions that this strife raises. He is convinced that he is coming to Madame Delisle's rescue by taking her "away from this country that is so *triste*" (LBSJ, 299) and is totally immersed in his role of seducer. He dresses the part, "clad always in cool, white duck, with a flower in his buttonhole" (LBSJ, 299), and effortlessly knows how to strike the right note with the impressionable Madame Delisle. But the narrator makes sure that we are not deceived, because, when Sépincourt declares his love in a passionate letter, the narrator ironically comments: "Men have written just such letters before, but Madame did not know it" (LBSJ, 300). Not surprisingly, the smooth operator Sépincourt is totally unprepared for the role of scorned lover.

Madame Delisle, on the other hand, is seen to flourish in her new, unexpected role. In the opening paragraphs of the story, she has been introduced as an immature child bride, who finds "much diversion in sitting for

hours before the mirror, contemplating her own loveliness" (LBSJ, 298), and who cannot sleep unless her maid, "old black Manna-Loulou" (LBSJ, 298), tells her bedtime stories. The narrator concludes: "[i]n short, she was a child, not able to realize the significance of the tragedy whose unfolding kept the civilized world in suspense" (LBSJ, 298). She appears hardly to have had a chance to grow into her matrimonial role before her husband went off to war. He is only a picture on the wall now and "[a]n occasional letter" that arrives "by round-about ways" (LBSJ, 299). Madame Delisle must admit that "[f]or months past the living image of her husband had been receding further and further into a mist" (LBSJ, 299). Sépincourt's seductive pleas are therefore well-timed: "She had suddenly become a woman capable of love or sacrifice. She would not hear Manna-Loulou's stories. She wanted to be alone, to tremble and to weep" (LBSJ, 299-300). The death of her husband, however, opens up new possibilities for her.

Madame Delisle decides to forego romance, but her decision to remain in Bayou St. John does not appear too much of a sacrifice. She decides to devote her life to the memory of her dead husband and is seen to be utterly content with this new vocation. She becomes, as we are told in the story's final paragraph, "a very pretty old lady, against whose long years of widowhood there has never been a breath of reproach" (LBSJ, 302). Instead of eloping to a foreign country with an adventurer like Sépincourt, she prefers a life of relative freedom and independence, in the socially acceptable, even admirable role of war widow. The reader, just as Sépincourt, may have expected Madame Delisle to grasp the freedom which the death of her husband offers her, by accepting a proposal from her lover and finding renewed security in a second marriage. However, it seems that Chopin wants to suggest that women's happiness or sense of fulfilment does not depend on their marital status. In Madame Delisle, Chopin has created a female character who exemplifies emotional, but also sexual independence, yet who remains at the same time respectable.

Madame Célestin's Divorce

In "Madame Célestin's Divorce," Chopin employs a similar narrative strategy with regard to the role of the male protagonist as in "A Lady of Bayou St. John." The plot of "Madame Célestin's Divorce" is less dramatic, however, and the narrator emphasizes the story's casual setting, which enhances the effect of the sudden twist at the end of the story. In fact, Chopin's narrator succeeds in manipulating the reader as effectively as Madame Célestin manipulates her gullible admirer.

The story's third-person narrator describes with mild irony and unobtrusive humour how Madame Célestin secures the attention of lawyer Paxton. She makes sure that she is always sweeping her gallery, looking her best, when he passes her house on his way to work: "Madame Célestin always

wore a neat and snugly fitting calico wrapper when she went out in the morning to sweep her small gallery" (MCD, 276). Her tactics are successful, for, we are told, "[l]awyer Paxton thought she looked very pretty in the gray one that was made with a graceful Watteau fold at the back: and with which she invariably wore a bow of pink ribbon at the throat" (MCD, 276). This introduction of lawyer Paxton immediately places him in the role of focalizer, through whose eyes we watch Madame Célestin as she "gather[s] up the train of her calico wrapper in one hand, and balancing the broom gracefully in the other," comes "tripping down to where the lawyer leaned, as comfortably as he could, over her picket fence" (MCD, 276). He is a receptive audience as she talks to him about the problems she has with her wayward husband. Lawyer Paxton is not Madame Célestin's only confidant, however. The narrator assures us that "[e]very one knew Madame Célestin's troubles" (MCD, 276). She clearly uses her predicament to get attention, and we cannot help wondering whether she is really as seriously hurt by her husband's irregular behaviour as she coaxes lawyer Paxton into believing.

Significantly, it is not Madame Célestin who raises the controversial issue of divorce, but lawyer Paxton. His status as a member of the legal establishment allows him to introduce the subject without seeming overtly subversive. As Madame Célestin takes her time to deliberate the option, lawyer Paxton can only look on. He is thus placed outside the story's main developments, and he can only comment on the reports Madame Célestin gives him. Thus when she tells him about her family's reaction – "they all plumb agains' that divo'ce" (MCD, 277) – lawyer Paxton acknowledges that this kind of opposition is to be expected "in this community of Creoles" (MCD, 277). When next she takes on the Catholic church, in the person of the bishop, he warns her: "You won't let the bishop dissuade you, I trust" (MCD, 278). But nothing seems to deter Madame Célestin: "The Pope himse'f can't make me stan' that any longer, if you say I got a right in the law to sen' Célestin sailing" (MCD, 278). She appears ready to take on the old-fashioned patriarchy which restrains her, with the support of lawyer Paxton who sees himself as her mentor and as a representative of a more modern and liberal society. However, as lawyer Paxton is consistently used as focalizer, we get only a very partial and biased view of the female protagonist and of what goes on inside her head, despite her apparent chatty openness.

The narrator undermines the reliability of lawyer Paxton in his role of focalizer, by pointing out how his growing personal interest in Madame Célestin influences his professional objectivity. We are told that lawyer Paxton undergoes "[a] noticeable change" (MCD, 278). He finds himself dreaming of starting a new life with the pretty divorcee. The narrator lightly ridicules his sudden care for his appearance and refers to his daydreaming as "a stupid habit" (MCD, 278). He thinks of Madame Célestin in terms of the role that he envisions for her. He decides that "[i]t would be very good to take unto himself a wife," and that Madame Célestin would be perfect "filling that sweet and sacred office" (MCD, 278). Aware of the fact that the community of Old

Natchitoches "would not hold them comfortably, perhaps" (MCD, 278), he concludes: "but the world was surely wide enough to live in" (MCD, 278). Preoccupied with his own fantasies, he fails to anticipate her sudden change of heart.

Madame Célestin one day confronts lawyer Paxton with the message that she has decided not to go ahead with the divorce: "You know, Judge, about that divo'ce. I been thinking, – I reckon you betta neva mine about that divo'ce" (MCD, 279), subtly emphasizing that it was never really *her* idea in the first place. Certainly, the remark that "[h]er face seemed to the lawyer to be unusually rosy" (MCD, 279) suggests that her husband's unexpected return has been a pleasant surprise. "But," the narrator adds, "maybe it was only the reflection of the pink bow at the throat" (MCD, 279). The seemingly innocent accessory to Madame Célestin's outfit, which in the opening paragraph of the story was presented as a sign of her frivolity and seductiveness, has now become a token of her new found happiness with her husband. There is no apparent reason for Madame Célestin's decision to remain in a marriage from which she seemed so eager to escape. In fact, we can only speculate about her motives, for the reader is not told more than lawyer Paxton. As a result of the consistent use of the male protagonist as focalizer, both he and the reader are left to wonder what caused Madame Célestin's change of heart. Again, as in "A Lady of Bayou St. John," Chopin resists providing the reader with the expected closure. The reader is carefully primed to accept Madame Célestin's controversial decision to divorce her husband. However, Chopin has her female protagonist make her own choice, emphasizing women's emotional and sexual independence.

The male protagonists in "A Lady of Bayou St. John" and "Madame Célestin's Divorce" are shown to stand on the sideline of the lives of the women they admire. Both men develop a rather condescending idea of what is good for the women they fall in love with. In this sense, these male protagonists fulfil the role of the normative outsider in local colour fiction, a role that is traditionally occupied by the narrator. The reader is tempted to accept the view of the male protagonist, because he is used as the focalizer, and possibly also because the reader is conditioned to take the male perspective for granted. We can see that Madame Delisle's adulterous elopement with Sépincourt would in some ways be preferable to her waiting for the return of a husband that she has already forgotten. And lawyer Paxton's advice to Madame Célestin to divorce her husband seems utterly logical in view of what we are told about her marriage. However, Chopin questions these assumptions. Her male protagonists are revealed as unreliable, as a result of their emotional involvement, and consequently they are shown to be unable to see or accept that the women may have alternatives. While not suggesting that Sépincourt and lawyer Paxton are biased, Chopin's narrators appeal to a perceptiveness in the reader which is lacking in their male protagonists. In "A Lady of Bayou St. John," the turning-point comes halfway through the story. The depiction of Madame

Delisle in her new role invites the reader to appreciate her choice as an attractive alternative. Madame Célestin springs her decision not only on lawyer Paxton, but also on the reader. It provides a good example of the surprise inversion or trick ending, which Chopin is said to have learnt from Guy de Maupassant. The endings of both stories resist the reader's expectations. There is little doubt that Chopin's sympathy lies with her female characters who dash the hopes of their admirers and make their own choices.

In the regionalist short stories of her collection *Bayou Folk*, Kate Chopin drew upon her personal experiences as an inhabitant of the American South to depict a regional world in a manner that found favour with her Northeastern publishers and their readers. She employs an empathic, yet distant, third-person narrator, whose presence is most clearly discernible in the mild irony with which the regional world and its inhabitants are depicted. The reader is allowed to enter the fictional world through the male focalizer, who is himself an outsider to the regional world that he inhabits and who is unable to fathom the mind of the female protagonist, who represents its various eccentricities. Chopin juxtaposes male and female emotional worlds, but at the same time she juxtaposes two social worlds. By making the focalizers both male and outsiders to the regional world, she draws a parallel between the inability of men to understand the emotional incentives of women and the inability of one social world to comprehend another. Both male focalizers are surprised by the eventual decisions of the wives who are tempted by an adulterous lover. As a result of the consistent use of these characters as focalizers, the reader is as much surprised by the ladies' decision as their lovers and is forced to accept that s/he has also not been allowed to fathom these women's emotional drives or the essence of human relations in their social world. Chopin thus uses the combination of the regionalist genre and the female adultery motif to comment on two kinds of inequity, that of men over women and that of her biased readers over the unknown world of the American South.

4.3. "Here was life, not fiction": Kate Chopin and Guy de Maupassant[22]

Despite the commercial success of and critical appreciation for *Bayou Folk*, Chopin was not content to limit herself to the type of stories which had made up this collection. She wanted to broaden her literary horizon and create stories about a wider range of topics than she had used so far and address them in a new and different way. The work of Guy de Maupassant became an important source of inspiration for her. Kate Chopin's indebtedness to the work of Maupassant is undeniable and has been widely acknowledged, both by her contemporary and her modern critics. He appears to have inspired her in both

[22] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from Kate Chopin's "Confidences" (CW, 700).

the development of her narrative strategies and her choice of plot and subject matter. With regard to the choice of subject matter, there was a shared interest in marriage relations. Maupassant's frequent use of the female adultery motif provided Chopin with examples of writing openly about female sexuality. However, Chopin was too good a writer to be a mere imitator of Maupassant. Rather, it seems as if she regarded him as a sparring partner, whose thematic interests she shared and whose narrative style she admired, but whose views she wanted to contest. That she recognized a professional peer in a renowned male, European writer, is a further indication that she saw herself as a writer in a tradition of major writers, rather than as an American regionalist.

Richard Fusco, whose *Maupassant and the American Short Story* contains the most extensive analysis of Maupassant's influence on Chopin's short fiction to date, has argued convincingly that she became familiar with the work of the French author well before the article cited in the title of this section was written. Fusco dates her discovery of Maupassant to the late 1880s, when, inspired by a biographical essay on the Frenchman by Henry James, Jonathan Sturges published a volume of Maupassant translations under the title *The Odd Number* (Fusco, 1-2 and 140-143). This means that Chopin was already familiar with Maupassant's work at the time when her early regionalist stories were published.[23] She explained her admiration in her often quoted essay "Confidences:"

> About eight years ago there fell accidentally into my hands a volume of Maupassant's tales. These were new to me. I had been in the woods, in the fields, groping around; looking for something big, satisfying, convincing, and finding nothing but – myself; a something neither big nor satisfying but wholly convincing. It was at this period of my emerging from the vast solitude in which I had been making my own acquaintance, that I stumbled upon Maupassant. I read his stories and marvelled at them. Here was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old-fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw. When a man does this, he gives us the best that he can; something valuable for it is genuine and spontaneous.[24]

[23] Toth points out that at least two of Chopin's contemporary reviewers recognized Maupassant's influence on her work (Toth 1991, 227).

[24] CW, 700-701. This draft essay was written in September 1896, but was not published in this form during Chopin's lifetime. The final version of the essay, entitled "In the Confidence of a Story-Writer," was published without the author's name in the *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (January 1899): 137-139; reprinted in CW, 703-705. The section about Maupassant had been cut.

Chopin's admiration for Maupassant's work induced her to translate a number of his short stories. Her upbringing in a French environment, as a result of which she was bilingual, enabled her to take up this project, which she began in 1894, a year after Maupassant's death. She selected six stories, which were nearly all about men who fall victim to madness and melancholy: "Un case de divorce" ("A Divorce Case"); "Fou?" ("Mad?"); "Lui?" ("It?"); "Solitude" ("Solitude"); "La Nuit" ("Night"); and "Suicides" ("Suicide"). She completed the translations over a relatively short period, during which she also continued to write her own fiction. She offered the translated stories to the publishers of *Bayou Folk*, as she intended them to be published in a collection entitled *Mad Stories*. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. rejected the proposal, on the grounds that they did not publish translations from current literature. It seems likely, however, that they were also less than pleasantly surprised that the general tone of the stories differed so markedly from that of her own first collection.[25]

Fusco acknowledges that Maupassant's influence on Chopin was "more inspirational than substantive" and that "[e]ven his use of form was suggestive rather than prescriptive" (Fusco, 146). He traces Maupassant's influence by studying Chopin's use of plot structures. He shows how she started out using simple, linear structures during the early years of her writing career and was inspired by Maupassant in the effective employment of the surprise inversion, the trick ending, while in her later stories she experimented with the descending helical structure that characterizes so much of Maupassant's later work.[26] A comparison of Chopin's and Maupassant's work moreover reveals clear thematic links. Chopin was evidently stimulated by the many examples of the use of the female adultery motif in Maupassant's work and several source studies point out her indebtedness to Maupassant in this respect.[27] However, there is an essential difference in the way both writers deal with topics such as female sexuality and female adultery. In Maupassant's work, female adultery is part and parcel of the battle of the sexes which pervades his literary world. Female desire and sexuality are essentially threatening, undermining male dominance and security. Even though Chopin was clearly inspired by Maupassant's use of the female adultery motif, she employed it to arrive at different conclusions about female desire and sexuality.

Adultery features in several of Maupassant's short stories, but also in five of his novels; he moreover discusses it in a number of his articles (Overton 2002, 199-218). In the article "L'Adultère," the introduction to the first

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[25] Fusco, 154-159. The first six stories were translated between July 1894 and December 1895. She later also translated "A Vendre" ("For Sale") and "Le Père Amable" ("Father Amable"). Of the eight translations, only three were published during Chopin's lifetime.

[26] Fusco distinguishes the following types of short stories in Maupassant's work: linear, ironic coda, surprise inversion, loop, descending helical, contrast, sinusoidal.

[27] Elaine Jasenas links *The Awakening* to Maupassant's "Solitude" and "Réveil" in "The French Influence in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,*" *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 4 (1976): 312-22. Pamela Gaudé compares *The Awakening* to Maupassant's *Une Vie* in "A Comparative Study of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Guy de Maupassant's *Une Vie,*" *Louisiana Review* (1975): 19-27. Pamela Gaudé also links Chopin's story "The Storm" to Maupassant's "Marocca" and "Moonlight" in "Kate Chopin's 'The Storm': A Story of Maupassant's Influence," *Kate Chopin Newsletter* 1.2 (Fall 1975): 1-6.

instalment of Zola's novel *Pot-Bouille*, published in *Le Gaulois*, he refers to "l'adultère bourgeois" as "cette question [. . .] éternelle et toujours actuelle" [this issue . . . eternal and always topical].[28] Maupassant's acceptance of adultery is closely linked to his view of marriage as a social convention that is contrary to man's natural inclinations. Maupassant underlines this view in the Preface of *L'Amour à Trois*, a novel by Paul Ginisty, in which he states:

> Donc le mariage crée une situation anormale, antinaturelle, et à laquelle on ne peut se résigner que grâce à des abnégations infinies, à une vertu supérieure, à des mérites absolument religieux, une situation à laquelle le mari ne se résigne jamais, une situation qui met éternellement la conscience en lutte avec l'instinct, avec l'amour.[29]
>
> [So marriage creates a situation which is abnormal, unnatural, to which one can only resign oneself through infinite renunciations, superior virtue, absolute religious gifts, a situation to which a husband will never resign himself, a situation which brings conscience in perpetual conflict with instinct, with love.]

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that, as Lorraine Nye Gaudefroy-Demombynes points out, marriages in Maupassant's work are rarely happy (Gaudefroy, 54). Apart from the unacceptable limitations that marriage imposes on the husband, the infidelity of wives is an important reason for unsuccessful marriages. As the male protagonist in "Lui?" exclaims:

> Je considère l'accouplement légal comme une bêtise. Je suis certain que huit maris sur dix sont cocus. Et ils ne méritent pas moins pour avoir eu l'imbécillité d'enchaîner leur vie, de renoncer à l'amour libre, la seule chose gaie et bonne au monde, de couper l'aile à la fantaisie qui nous pousse sans cesse à toutes les femmes etc., etc. (Maupassant 2, 852)
>
> [I still consider legal mating a folly. I am certain that eight out of ten men are cuckolds. And they do not deserve any less, having been so stupid as to enchain their lives, to renounce free love, the only pleasant and good thing on earth, to clip the wings of fantasy that drive us incessantly towards all the women etc., etc.][30]

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[28] Guy de Maupassant, "L'Adultère," *Le Gaulois* (23 January 1882), Maupassant par les textes, ed. Thierry Selva, 6 May 2000, Association des amis de Guy de Maupassant, 6 March 2008 <http://maupassant.free.fr/chroniq/adultere.html>.

[29] Guy de Maupassant, "Preface," *L'Amour à Trois* by Paul Ginisty (Paris: Baillière, 1884), Maupassant par les textes, ed. Thierry Selva, 9 June 2000, Association des amis de Guy de Maupassant, 6 March 2008 <http://maupassant.free.fr/cadre.php?page=oeuvre>.

[30] "Lui?" is one of Maupassant's short stories that was translated by Kate Chopin; in her translation it became "It?" Chopin's translations of Maupassant's short stories were published in Thomas Bonner, Jr., *The Kate Chopin Companion* (New York, [etc.]: Greenwood Press, 1988),

Men, according to this Maupassant character, are caught in a vicious circle. They are forced to submit to the social convention of the monogamous marriage, even though it is contrary to their natural desire to remain at liberty to love more than one woman. Subsequently they are punished for their stupidity by the infidelity of their wives.

There is, as Bill Overton points out, "a masculine bias that runs through Maupassant's work, despite his ability, when he wished, to represent female characters with insight and sympathy" (Overton 2002, 214). The view that is dominant is that of women as weak, capricious and born to please. Maupassant argues in the above-mentioned "Preface" to *L'Amour à Trois*:

> [U]ne femme, élevée pour plaire, instruite dans cette pensée que l'amour est son domaine, sa faculté et sa seule joie au monde (tels sont, en effet, les enseignements de la société); créée par la nature même faible, changeante, capricieuse, entraînable; faite coquette par la nature et par la société ensemble.[31]
>
> [A woman, raised to please, instructed on the basis of the idea that love is her domain, her gift and her sole joy on earth (such are, effectively, the lessons of society); created by nature itself weak, fickle, capricious, irresolute; turned into a coquette by both nature and society together.]

Women may not be able to help being what they are and doing what they do, but that does not make them less dangerous to men, as he points out in his essay "La Lysistrata Moderne."[32]

The view expressed in the articles cited also forms the basis for the depiction of many of Maupassant's female characters in his fiction, which has given him a reputation of being a pessimist when it came to the relations between the sexes, even of being a misogynist. Although adulterous women abound in Maupassant's short story work, that does not mean that they are all depicted in entirely negative terms. As I pointed out in chapter 2, some of his adulteresses are disarmingly naive or uncalculating. And when the depiction of the adulterous woman is excessive in its condemnation, as in "La Bûche" [The Log], Maupassant employs a male narrator whose view of women, based on platitudes and preconceived notions, is so one-sided that it seriously affects his credibility.

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hereafter referred to as KCC. This citation: p. 189. In Chopin's translation of "Lui?," which was first published in the *St. Louis Life* of 23 February 1895, the reference to the cuckolded husbands was cut. Fusco suggests that "[e]ither Chopin yielded to an editor's demand to reduce her copy or the editors themselves applied a blue pencil" (Fusco, 157). Fusco is, in my view justifiably, confident that Chopin would not have wanted to cut the passage on account of its contents.

[31] See note 29.

[32] Guy de Maupassant, "La Lysistrata Moderne," *Le Gaulois* (30 December 1880), Maupassant par les textes, ed. Thierry Selva, 1 May 2000, Association des amis de Guy de Maupassant, 6 March 2008 <http://maupassant.free.fr/chroniq/lysistrata.html>.

In "La Bûche," the male narrator-protagonist recounts how one evening the wife of an old friend tries to seduce him. The narrator's depiction of the young woman is very harsh indeed. As soon as they are alone, his friend's wife starts to adopt seductive poses: "la robe un peu relevée, laissant voir un bas de soie rouge que les éclats du foyer enflammait par instants" (Maupassant 1, 783) [the dress a little hitched up, revealing a stocking of red silk that glowed from time to time in the light of the fire]. He is indignant at the behaviour of "cette petite folle perverse et rusée, effroyablement sensuelle sans doute, à qui son mari déjà ne suffisait plus!" (Maupassant 1, 783) [this perverse and sly little fool, no doubt terribly sensuous, for whom already her husband did not suffice!]. However, the temptation is strong and he is on the verge of succumbing to her charms, "car elle était affolante en sa perfidie, cette fille, et enflammée d'audace, et palpitante et acharnée" (Maupassant 1, 783) [because she was maddening in her perfidiousness, the little slut, and hot with daring, and trembling and fiery]. When a burning log, falling from the hearth, requires his immediate attention, he is saved from being caught *in flagrante delicto* by the husband upon the latter's entrance a moment later. The narrator's ranting at the sensuality and perfidy of the woman recalls Maupassant's own words in essays such as "La Lysistrata Moderne."

Maupassant's choice of narrative point of view puts the story in a different perspective, however, for "La Bûche" does not open with the account of the seduction, but with a scene in which two old friends, a man and a woman, are sitting in front of a fire. The third-person narrator describes the woman as "une de ces vieilles adorables" (Maupassant 1, 779) [one of those dear old ladies], "avec cet oeil curieux des femmes qui veulent savoir" (Maupassant 1, 780) [with the curious look of women that want to know things]. The man, on the other hand, is rather nondescript, "un ami de toutes les semaines, un compagnon de voyage dans l'existence. Rien de plus d'ailleurs" (Maupassant 1, 779) [a friend for all weeks, a companion for life's voyage. Nothing more]. The man begins the story of his seduction by explaining his anger at his friend's marriage, which he believed would endanger their friendship, and by expressing his lack of belief in the institution of marriage. He reveals himself as having an understanding of women which is based entirely on platitudes and preconceived notions: "[J]e jetais en moi-même cette exclamation philosophique: O cervelle féminine, te voilà bien!" (Maupassant 1, 783) [I exclaimed to myself: Oh, a woman's brain, that's typical]. By having the incident recounted by such a clearly biased male narrator, Maupassant undercuts the severe criticism vented at the woman's behaviour, although admittedly not all of his readers will have appreciated this kind of subtlety.

"La Bûche" is one of the many examples in Maupassant's short story work in which a woman is presented as using her sexuality to challenge male security and superiority in the relation between the sexes. The story is especially interesting in relation to Kate Chopin's "The Kiss" (1895), which is also about a young wife who rather audaciously invites the amorous attentions of her husband's friend, but which emphasizes the socio-economic, rather than

the sexual motivation of the adulteress. Similarly, Chopin's "Her Letters" (1895) contains several Maupassantian echoes, particularly in the depiction of the deceived husband, but represents a perspective on the adulteress which differs markedly from that which we find in many of Maupassant's stories and which exemplifies Chopin's views on the motivation of the transgressive wife.

The Kiss

In its depiction of a self-centred young woman who callously manipulates the men around her, "The Kiss" is perhaps one of the most Maupassant-like of Chopin's female adultery stories. Despite the hint of eroticism in the title, Chopin's story is not nearly as risqué as Maupassant's "La Bûche." It is not the female protagonist's sexual appetite which is the issue, but her mercenary attitude in her relationships with men. Although Chopin may have accepted that the social position of a future mate was a valid selection criterion, especially in view of the social position of nineteenth-century women, for whom a successful marriage was often of prime importance, in "The Kiss," she implicitly criticizes women who choose to marry for money rather than love.

Nathalie, the female protagonist of "The Kiss," is determined to conquer Brantain, because "[t]he rather insignificant and unattractive Brantain was enormously rich; and she liked and required the entourage which wealth could give her" (TK, 379). Her scheme nearly collapses when Harvy, her old admirer and a friend of Brantain's, interrupts their courting and presses "an ardent, lingering kiss upon her lips" (TK, 379), without being aware of Brantain's presence. Nathalie manages to convince Brantain that Harvy and she "have always been like cousins – like brother and sister" (TK, 380) and the danger of Brantain losing interest is averted. When Harvy approaches her at her wedding with the message: "Your husband [. . .] has sent me over to kiss you" (TK, 381), she faces her old admirer confidently:

> She felt like a chess player who, by the clever handling of his pieces, sees the game taking the course intended. Her eyes were bright and tender with a smile as they glanced up into his; and her lips looked hungry for the kiss which they invited. (TK, 381)

Having married for money, Nathalie clearly does not plan to give up romance and has no qualms about continuing her relationship with Harvy. But she is in for a surprise; Harvy is not prepared to play along and tells her: "I didn't tell him so, it would have seemed ungrateful, but I can tell you. I've stopped kissing women; it's dangerous" (TK, 381). We do not hear what Nathalie's reaction is; she is not given the last word. Instead, the narrator concludes:

> Well, she had Brantain and his millions left. A person can't have everything in this world; and it was a little unreasonable of her to expect it. (TK, 381)

The final lines of the story function as an ironic coda, a literary device also frequently used by Maupassant (Fusco, 17-21). The coda does not throw a different light on what has happened, but is an afterthought, which strengthens the irony of the situation which the adulterous bride has created for herself.

"The Kiss" is a good example of Maupassant's influence on Chopin's story-telling technique. With regard to the female adultery motif, however, Chopin's "The Kiss" and Maupassant's "La Bûche" have different emphases. "The Kiss" presents the adulterous leanings of the female protagonist as part of her social ambitions, rather than her sexual demands. The beautiful Nathalie wants to have her cake *and* eat it. Nancy Walker points out: "If Maupassant inspired Chopin to be more daring in her subject matter than were many of her contemporaries, the resulting fiction deals more with challenges to social convention than with states of obsession and despair" (Walker, 99). The narrative structure of "The Kiss" is much simpler than that of "La Bûche," with its first-person narrator, whose biased attitude towards women colours the embedded story which he recounts. "The Kiss" has a third-person narrator, who describes the confrontations of the three main characters with light-hearted detachment. Despite the detached tone, the narrative clearly shows that the narrator has much more sympathy for the men than for the scheming Nathalie. Her suitor Brantain is described as "a frank, blustering fellow without guile enough to conceal his feelings" (TK, 379). The narrator presents Harvy's attitude towards Nathalie as sincere and spontaneous and as justifiably piqued at her harsh response to his open display of fondness for her. Nathalie, on the other hand, is seen to be calculating and dishonest. The narrator gives us the impression that she will get her way, until right at the end of the story the tables are turned. The trick that Harvy plays upon her, however, is a relatively mild rebuke for her egoistic and inconsiderate behaviour. The narrator does not display moral indignation at Nathalie's adulterous inclinations, but implies criticism at the mercenary motivation behind her marriage to Brantain.

Her Letters

"Her Letters," which Chopin wrote in November 1894 and which was first published in April 1895, echoes some of the Maupassant stories that Chopin translated in the same period (Toth 1999, 250-251), particularly in the depiction of the male protagonist, the deceived husband. However, the narrator's use of two focalizers, the adulterous wife and the deceived husband, provides a dual perspective on the adulterous relationship. In "Her Letters," a widower finds a bundle of letters among his wife's belongings. He destroys

them unread, as she requested, but he is subsequently riddled with uncertainty about the nature of the letters and his wife's fidelity and is driven to suicide. The main focus of "Her Letters" is on the husband, whose slow descent into obsessive despair is described in parts II-IV of the story. These parts clearly echo Maupassant's "Solitude," and "Fou?" However, the structure of the story as a whole, with an opening part which focuses on the adulterous wife, adds to the complexity of Chopin's story. It indicates that she wanted to tell not only the story of the deceived husband, but also that of his transgressive wife.

"Her Letters" opens with a dramatic scene. We understand right from the start that we are going to witness something very private, for the narrator tells us in the first sentence: "She had given orders that she wished to remain undisturbed and moreover had locked the doors of her room" (HL, 398). A nameless woman, anticipating her imminent death, prepares to burn the letters she received from a man with whom, as we come to understand, she once had an affair. The narrator stresses the woman's sensitivity and her vulnerability, but also her strength: "There was a strong deliberation in the lines of her long, thin, sensitive face; her hands, too, were long and delicate and blue-veined" (HL, 398). The destruction of the love letters is a very painful process, which recalls Maupassant's "Suicides," in which an unnamed narrator quotes a suicide letter, whose writer exclaims:

> Oh! ne touchez jamais à ce meuble, à ce cimetière, des correspondances d'autrefois, si vous tenez à la vie! Et, si vous l'ouvrez par hasard, saisissez à pleines mains les lettres qu'il contient, fermez les yeux pour n'en point lire un mot, pour qu'une seule écriture oubliée et reconnue ne vous jette d'un seul coup dans l'océan des souvenirs; portez au feu des papiers mortels; et, quand ils seront cendres, écrasez-les encore en une poussière invisible... ou sinon vous êtes perdu... comme je suis perdu depuis une heure!... (Maupassant 2, 826)
>
> [Oh, if you value your life, never disturb the resting place of your old correspondence or if you are led by accident to do so, seize those letters by handsful and without a glance that might awaken remembrance, cast them into the flames; crush their very ashes into an invisible powder, else you are lost – as I have been lost for the past hour.] (KCC, 205)

The exercise of burning her lover's letters severely agitates the woman; she stares into the fire with "pained and savage eyes" (HL, 399). When she realizes the implications of what she is doing, she allows herself a last look at the remembrances of happier times. Janet Beer, in her valuable discussion of desire in Chopin's short stories, says: "The erotic charge carried by the description of her enactment of a ritual communion with her lost love is almost

palpable as she reprieves his letters from being thrown into the fire."[33] There is an animal savageness in: "With her sharp white teeth she tore the far corner from the letter, where the name was written; she bit the torn scrap and tasted it between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel" (HL, 399). The imagery is both strongly religious and highly sexual, as Beer points out. The scrap of the letter upon her tongue is like the consecrated wafer, the transubstantiation of the lover which she receives into her body. The use of religious imagery in relation to sexual arousal is not infrequent in Chopin's female adultery stories; I will return to this in the final section of this chapter.

The narrator of "Her Letters" shows no disapproval for the woman's behaviour. Janet Beer argues: "The unfaithful wife is a given, there is no moral comment, no intervention in the text which would suggest that the narrator had any opinion at all about the woman's conduct" (Beer, 46). The opening part of the story, however, is also devoid of the light-hearted irony that characterizes much of Chopin's short story work. By describing in great detail the almost desperate attempt to reverse the woman's conscious decision to destroy the tangible evidence of her adulterous affair, the narrator invites the reader to share the tactile experience. The narrator moreover explains the importance of the letters for the woman, because we are told her days without them would have seemed "desolate and empty" (HL, 399), "with only her thoughts, illusive thoughts that she could not hold in her hands and press, as she did these, to her cheeks and her heart" (HL, 399). The letters form the necessary props to recreate the "intoxicating dream of the days when she felt she had lived" (HL, 400). The adulterous affair was evidently an intense and essential experience, which she needs to relive from time to time, in order to give meaning to her life.

Unable to part with her lover's letters, the woman decides to leave them for her husband to find, with attached to the bundle a note reading: "I leave this package to the care of my husband. With perfect faith in his loyalty and his love, I ask him to destroy it unopened" (HL, 400). It is a decision which reveals trust, but which is also a posthumous stab at their complacent relationship. Both Jane Le Marquand and Martha Cutter find the woman's decision subversive. By not destroying the letters, "the woman takes control of her destiny, or, at least, the destiny of her identity."[34] She leaves behind a trace of the woman she really was, the woman her husband never knew, thereby destroying the image of the dutiful, loving wife. The letters are "subversive of male control in the most literal sense: they drive a husband to question his perception of his wife and to kill himself."[35] This interpretation, however, leaves undiscussed the woman's intention and her ultimate attempt to destroy

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[33] Janet Beer, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1997) 45.

[34] Jane Le Marquand, "Kate Chopin as Feminist: Subverting the French Androcentric Infuence," *Deep South* 2.3 (Spring 1996), 7 March 2008 <http://www.otago.ac.nz/DeepSouth/vol2no3/chopin.html>.

[35] Martha Cutter, *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women's Writing, 1850-1930* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 103.

the letters, just before her death. We are told: "She meant, of course, to destroy them herself before the end came" (HL, 399). That this was indeed her intention, can be gathered from the first paragraph of part II, which tells us: "[T]hey had found her stretched upon the floor, clutching the key of her writing desk, which she appeared to have been attempting to reach when death overtook her" (HL, 400). This forms the only clear link between the woman's deliberations as described in part I and the rest of the story. The woman's final action is filled with meaning. Although she could not bear to part with the letters during her lifetime, the woman wants to prevent them from being found by her husband. Whether in order to spare her husband having to carry out her provocative final request, or in order to take her secret with her into her grave, or both, is a matter of interpretation. The opening of the husband's story with the information that his ensuing dilemma was nearly averted adds sadness and bitterness to his ultimate fate, since leaving her adulterous letters to be destroyed by her husband was not a pre-meditated attempt on his wife's part to subvert her husband's authority posthumously.

The woman's husband is hardly mentioned in the first part of the story. He is only obliquely referred to as "one [. . .] who was near to her, and whose tenderness and years of devotion had made him, in a manner, dear to her" (HL, 399). This changes in the three following parts of the story, which focus on his response to finding the letters after her death and his subsequent insecurity about their contents and his wife's fidelity. This shift in focus gives the story a very different thematic emphasis. "Her Letters" appears to turn into a story about suspicion and jealousy and its effects upon the husband, which, as I have indicated in chapter 2, is also a frequently used motif in nineteenth-century literature. Janet Beer notes that "[t]he structure of the story – allowing three parts out of four to an account of the husband's mental breakdown – means that the woman's story becomes – to all intents and purposes – the introduction to the real business of the narrative which is to show the path to destruction of the man whose complacencies have been destroyed" (Beer, 46). To regard part I as a mere prelude to the actual story, however, is doing insufficient justice to its significance. The opening part of "Her Letters" changes the story's emphasis, and as such fundamentally influences the reader's interpretation of the following three parts. It becomes, as a result, not solely a story about a deceived husband, of which there are a number of examples in the short story work of Maupassant and other nineteenth-century writers. The specific attention for the transgressive woman in this story, which otherwise has all the characteristics of the type of short story dealing with the female adultery motif from the point of view of the jealous husband, indicates that Chopin wanted the story to be about the adulterous wife as much as about the deceived husband.

The reader's knowledge of the nature of the letters invites understanding and compassion for the husband. If the husband is quick to realize the likely contents of the letters – "What secret save one could a woman choose to have die with her?" (HL, 401) – the reader is certain about what they conveyed.

Having had a glimpse of the marriage from the wife's perspective in part I of the story sharpens our awareness of the man's inadequacy as a husband. In the narrator's description of him these two aspects come together:

> [E]very line of his face – no longer young – spoke loyalty and honesty, and his eyes were as faithful as a dog's and as loving. He was a tall, powerful man, standing there in the firelight, with shoulders that stooped a little, and hair that was growing somewhat thin and gray, and a face that was distinguished, and must have been handsome when he smiled. But he was slow. (HL, 400-401)

His discovery of the letters, however, arouses in him "the man-instinct of possession" (HL, 401). For a moment he seems capable of anything: "The agonizing suspicion that perhaps another had shared with him her thoughts, her affections, her life, deprived him for a swift instant of honor and reason" (HL, 401).[36] This emphasis on the loss of rational faculties and the insult to male pride recalls other jealous husbands in literature. However, the husband of "Her Letters" becomes a victim rather than an aggressor, who can only find peace of mind in suicide. The depiction of his rapid decline into insanity is Maupassantian in its use of what Fusco terms the descending-helical structure (Fusco, 49-63). But whereas Maupassant usually introduces a first-person narrator-protagonist in this type of story, allowing the reader to join the character in his descent into madness, Chopin sticks to her usual third-person narrator. This strongly discourages full identification with the male protagonist. Chopin probably chose to avoid this because she wanted to secure the reader's continuing interest in the female protagonist. In the final three parts of the story, which focus on the husband's response to his wife's death and his discovery of the letters, the narrator continues to tell the woman's story, although adding an entirely different perspective to that which we were given in the opening part.

In part I of "Her Letters," the female protagonist is seen through the eyes of the third-person narrator and depicted as sensitive and passionate. But in the following parts of the short story the husband is used as focalizer and we

[36] "Her Letters" has elements of Maupassant's "Fou?," which in Chopin's translation became "Mad?" Maupassant's story (Maupassant 2, 785-789) is the account of a husband who is convinced that his wife has lost all interest in him and finds sexual gratification in an erotic relationship with her horse. Maupassant employs the female adultery motif to show the workings of a highly strung mind. His narrator-protagonist is a jealous husband, who is at once attracted to his wife's sensuous beauty and repelled by her intense and animal-like sexuality. He starts his account with the question: "Suis-je fou? ou seulement jaloux?" [Is this madness that possesss me, or only jealousy? (KCC, 185)]. He paints a vivid picture of his wife's change from a passionately affectionate woman to one who is driven by animal lust. He becomes convinced that she is in love with her horse and finds sexual gratification in riding it. His jealousy ultimately leads him to kill both his wife and her horse. His final question, directed at himself as much as the reader is: "Dites-moi, suis-je-fou?" [Tell me, am I mad? (KCC, 187)]. The reader will, unlike the narrator-protagonist, not fail to see that it is probably the groom rather than the horse that is the object of his wife's desire. Chopin did not find a publisher for this translation; Maupassant's story, with its explicit descriptions of the sensuous wife and the suggestion of a highly irregular sexual attraction, would have been too outrageous for Chopin's publishers.

get a rather different picture of her. He is belatedly forced to try to get to know his wife as she really was: "She had never seemed in her lifetime to have had a secret from him. He knew her to have been cold and passionless, but true, and watchful of his comfort and his happiness" (HL, 401). He searches her room for scraps of evidence that will confirm his suspicion, but finds nothing. He discovers that his image of his wife is confirmed by that of others. To the men who had known her "she had been unsympathetic because of her coldness of manner. One had admired her intellect; another her accomplishments; a third had thought her beautiful before disease claimed her, regretting, however, that her beauty had lacked warmth of color and expression" (HL, 404). Of the women, "[m]ost of them had loved her; those who had not had held her in respect and esteem" (HL, 404). This shift in perspective on the woman's life underlines its duality; emotionally, she has been leading a double life. The picture of the distant and cold woman, as she appeared to those around her, strengthens the reader's bond with the woman. We are the only ones who have been allowed a glimpse of the woman she really was, the woman who desperately sought to fill a void in her life.

Chopin's use of the literary motif of the deceived husband in "Her Letters" is highly significant. She elaborates on the conventional employment of the motif by consciously dividing the attention over both spouses, rather than concentrating on the husband. By drawing an intimate portrait of the adulterous wife, inviting the reader to feel the importance of the illicit relationship for her emotional well-being, Chopin does not discount the husband's pain and unhappiness, but forces the reader to view the marriage in all its complexity.

Inspired by Maupassant's narrative style and choice of subject matter, Kate Chopin increasingly used her female adultery short stories to vent her liberal views on the role of sexuality in male-female relationships, and particularly on sexuality as a driving force behind a woman's choice of a sexual partner. This is most prominent in her stories "A Respectable Woman" and "The Storm," which I will discuss in the next section. She also expressed her views on this topic, however, in one of the few remaining non-fictional publications from her hand, which I will discuss first.

4.4. "An uncontrollable emotion": The sexual awakening of Kate Chopin's female characters[37]

In a newspaper article which appeared in January 1898, Chopin tactfully dissociated herself from the restrictive view of patriarchal society which

[37] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from "'Is Love Divine?' The Question Answered by Three Ladies Well Known in St. Louis Society," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (16 January 1898); reprinted in KCPP, 218-220.

ignored sexual attraction as an important motivation in the choice of a partner and an essential element in a marriage. She had just finished writing *The Awakening*, which was to appear a little over a year later, when she was asked to contribute to an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.* "Three ladies well known in St. Louis society" provided a reaction to the statement "Love is not divine. It is a thing to be controlled by circumstances and environment" (KCPP, 218). The first of the three ladies, Mrs. Tudor F. Brooks, felt "that love is certainly a divine emotion – a God-sent gift" (KCPP, 218). According to the second respondent, Mrs. Shreve Carter, "all true women must cherish this belief, deep down in their hearts, that there exists, some time and somewhere, their kindred soul – their dual spirit" (KCPP, 219). Whereas her co-respondents provided conventional and uncontroversial answers, stressing the value of emotional rapport in a relationship, Chopin, who, according to the editor, "as a novelist should know what love is" (KCPP, 219), provided a more polemical reaction:

> It is as difficult to distinguish between the divine love and the natural, animal love, as it is to explain just why we love at all. [. . .] One really never knows the exact, definite thing which incites love for any one person, and one can never truly know whether this love is the result of circumstances or whether it is predestination. I am inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure divine. (KCPP, 219)

In order to love, Chopin continued, one needs to be "irresistibly drawn by an indefinable current of magnetism," and love is "an uncontrollable emotion that allows of no analyzation and no vivisection" (KCPP, 219-220). Her use of the terms "animal instinct" and "magnetism" indicates that Chopin regarded love as something which could not and should not be governed by reason. She seemed to accept that love is – at least partly – determined by sexual attraction, which she regarded as natural and rationally uncontrollable. The article betrays her interest in the contemporary discussion on the origin of mankind and the principles of sexual selection, following the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859. In view of the criticism of the religious establishment on Darwin's theories, Chopin's reference to "natural, animal love" as "divine," in the sense of proceeding from God, is evidence of the subversiveness of her views on these matters.

According to Bert Bender, the influence of Darwin's theories on Chopin's work has been underestimated.[38] Her St. Louis friend William Schuyler

[38] The influence of Darwin's theories on Chopin's work is discussed by Bert Bender in two studies: "The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*," *American Literature* 63 (September 1991): 459-473; and "Kate Chopin's Quarrel with Darwin before *The Awakening*," *Journal of American Studies* 26 (1992): 185-204. Both articles were reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996) 117-128 and 99-116 respectively. Unless otherwise noted, further references to these articles are from this publication.

indicated that Chopin was more than familiar with Darwin's work. In a biographical sketch of Chopin, he wrote:

> In the midst of all her labors she still found time to keep up her reading, which she had never abandoned, but the subjects which now attracted her were almost entirely scientific, the departments of Biology and Anthropology having a special interest for her. The works of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer were her daily companions; for the study of the human species, both general and particular, has always been her constant delight.[39]

Bert Bender argues that Chopin accepted Darwin's theories of sexual selection. He thinks that she recognized that they were "profoundly illuminating in her work with the age-old and all-important courtship plot" (Bender 1992, 99), but that she questioned Darwin's views on the female role in the process, "especially his views on the inferiority of women and, most emphatically, his theory of the female's modesty, her passivity in the sex drama as a creature without desire" (Bender 1992, 99). In focusing his theory on Darwin, Bender found a useful, but rather obvious peg on which to hang his explanation for the way in which Chopin deals with female sexuality. However, it seems a rather narrow focus. I suggest that Chopin's views can be linked to the wider nineteenth-century debate on female sexuality, which had many different contributors.

Peter Gay gives a survey of the views that representatives of the medical profession in various countries expressed on the nature of women's sexual experience (Gay, 144-168). He outlines the theories of those who recognized that women had a sexual drive, and points out that "their camp, though far from timid, isolated, or eccentric, was for some decades increasingly outnumbered, and its opinions partially drowned out, by far more somber voices denying the healthy and respectable woman any natural erotic inclinations whatever" (Gay, 153). Without wanting to suggest that Chopin was familiar with all the individual contributions to the debate, which was held on both sides of the Atlantic, I would argue that she was very well aware of contemporary developments in the theories on female sexuality and took a liberal stand, as becomes clear from her contribution to the discussion in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, quoted above, and from her fictional work. The female adultery motif provided a particularly good literary vehicle for addressing this topic in her short stories. In "A Respectable Woman" and "The Storm," the most explicitly erotic of Chopin's female adultery stories, Chopin created married female protagonists who are confronted with this "indefinable current

[39] William Schuyler, "Kate Chopin," *The Writer* 7 (August 1984): 115-117; reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996): 61-64. Schuyler refers to Thomas Huxley, the English biologist and grandfather of the writer Aldous Huxley, and the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, who, in *Principles of Biology* (1864), coined the term "survival of the fittest," after reading Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species.*

of magnetism" that Chopin had described in her newspaper article, and who allow themselves to be drawn by it.

A Respectable Woman

In "A Respectable Woman" (1894), the sexual attraction of the female protagonist, Mrs. Baroda, to her house guest, an old friend of her husband's, is hinted at, but its potential consequences are carefully deferred to a moment which falls outside the scope of the story. Chopin thus made sure that there was little or nothing in the story which her publishers could deem offensive. Chopin's choice of title ironically refers to the contemporary debate on what 'respectable' women were and were not believed to and supposed to feel.

Chopin's third-person narrator introduces the heroine with considerable ironic detachment. Mrs. Baroda has just had a winter season in New Orleans, full of social engagements, and is not keen on having to entertain guests on her plantation. When she learns that her husband has invited his friend Gouvernail to come and stay with them, she is "a little provoked" (RW, 333). Mrs. Baroda is pictured as a bit shallow, with rather preconceived notions about things that she has little intimate knowledge of. Although she has heard of her husband's old friend, she does not know him, for he is "a journalist, and in no sense a society man or 'a man about town,' which were, perhaps, some of the reasons she had never met him" (RW, 333). Mrs. Baroda's social world does not include men of letters, and she therefore has a rather negative, stereotyped image of him: "She pictured him tall, slim, cynical; with eye-glasses, and his hands in his pockets; and she did not like him" (RW, 333). She nonetheless approaches him with the verve of an accomplished hostess, but he makes "no direct appeal to her approval or even esteem" (RW, 333). Mrs. Baroda is first "puzzled" and then "piqued" (RW, 334) when he does nothing to ingratiate himself with her. As she is not used to being treated like this by men, she displays a sense of purpose in her attempt to force him to react, first by ignoring him and then, when that does not produce the desired effect, by imposing herself on him. The reader's sympathy as a result is not so much with the female protagonist as with the object of her attention, Gouvernail.

We are given a picture of the slightly enigmatic journalist as seen through Mrs. Baroda's eyes, but interspersed with the narrator's ironic commentary on her and her evaluation. Gouvernail is said to sit "rather mute and receptive before her chatty eagerness" (RW, 333), but his behaviour is "as courteous toward her as the most exacting woman could require" (RW, 333). Mrs. Baroda cannot help being intrigued: "Why she liked him she could not explain satisfactorily to herself" (RW, 333), but, the narrator adds, she only "partly attempted to do so" (RW, 333). She comes to the conclusion that "[i]ndeed, he was a lovable, inoffensive fellow" (RW, 334), but as he refuses to behave "like others" (RW, 334), he is written off as dull and uninteresting. The narrator

thus succeeds in presenting a view of Gouvernail which is immediately coloured by the critical description of Mrs. Baroda's attitude towards him.

The shift to the scene in which Mrs. Baroda finds herself alone with Gouvernail and is overwhelmed by her feelings of sexual attraction to him may seem rather sudden, but has in fact been prepared carefully. In the days leading up to their nocturnal meeting in the garden, Mrs. Baroda is shown to be very aware of Gouvernail's physical presence. She observes him as he is enjoying his well-earned rest at her husband's plantation, and she appears to share the physical sensations which he experiences. Thus she hears him pronounce his deep satisfaction "as the air that swept across the sugar field caressed him with its warm and scented velvety touch" (RW, 334), and she watches him enjoy the company of the dogs, "rubbing themselves sociably against his legs" (RW, 334). His presence triggers her senses in a way that she does not know how to deal with. When she goes out into the garden for a midnight stroll, the narrator comments that "[s]he had never known her thoughts or her intentions to be so confused. She could gather nothing from them but the feeling of a distinct necessity to quit her house in the morning" (RW, 335). The narrator thus carefully prepares the reader for Mrs. Baroda's emotional turmoil during her encounter with Gouvernail in the garden.

In that scene, the narrator emphasizes the folly of Mrs. Baroda's infatuation by presenting Gouvernail as a romantic hero who is rather the worse for wear. He is said to make "some commonplace observation upon the baneful effect of the night air" (RW, 335) and he cites from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself,"

> Night of south winds – night of the large few stars!
> Still nodding night –

The quotation becomes especially intriguing when the reader supplies the preceding and following lines: "Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night!" [. . .] "Mad naked summer night!"[40] Lewis Leary suggests that Chopin omitted these lines consciously and hoped that her readers would be able to recognize the implications that she felt restricted to express openly and explicitly.[41] Bernard Koloski thinks that the quotation also allows us to make inferences about the speaker and that Gouvernail's choice of poetry indicates that he "is sensitive to the sexual longings which are at the moment shaking his friend's wife."[42] However, we are told that his quotation "indeed, was not addressed to her" (RW, 335), and it is more likely that Gouvernail is unconscious of the effect he has on Mrs. Baroda. Rather than a

[40] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1888; New York: The Library of America, 1982) 47.
[41] Lewis Leary, "Kate Chopin and Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Review* 16 (1970): 121; cited in Joyce Dyer, "Gouvernail, Kate Chopin's Sensitive Bachelor," *The Southern Literary Journal*, 14 (Fall, 1981): 48.
[42] Bernard Koloski, "The Swinburne Lines in *The Awakening*," *American Literature*, 45 (1974): 608.

conscious attempt to confuse his hostess by making sexually suggestive remarks, Gouvernail's choice of quotation is unintentionally ambiguous. For a moment, Mrs. Baroda believes herself to be in danger of losing control.

> Her mind only vaguely grasped what he was saying. Her physical being was for the moment predominant. She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice. She wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips. She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek – she did not care what – as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman. (RW, 335)

Gouvernail remains imperturbed through it all, apparently completely unaware of Mrs. Baroda's emotional turmoil. Even when she suddenly leaves him, he shows no response: "Before she reached the house, Gouvernail had lighted a fresh cigar and ended his apostrophe to the night" (RW, 336). The narrator's subtly ironic portrayal of Gouvernail as a man desired in spite of himself emphasizes that Mrs. Baroda has allowed herself to get carried away by her own imagination.

The narrator's irony increases when we are told how Mrs. Baroda attempts to resolve her predicament. She is said to be tempted yet again, this time "to tell her husband – who was also her friend – of this folly that had seized her" (RW, 336). But she does not "yield to the temptation" (RW, 336), for she decides that sharing the experience with her husband will make it more important than she is prepared to acknowledge: "[b]eside being a respectable woman she was a very sensible one; and she knew there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone" (RW, 336). The ironic hyperbole of the "folly" which becomes one of life's "battles" underlines the narrator's view of the entire affair as slightly ridiculous. Yet the implications are more serious than the narrator's light-hearted tone suggests. When Mrs. Baroda returns home after her temporary escape to her aunt's, we are told that although her husband "greatly desired" to invite his friend again, "this desire yielded to his wife's strenuous opposition" (RW, 336). The recurring use of the word "desire" ironically highlights Mr. Baroda's innocence of his wife's feelings for his friend. Mrs. Baroda has not used the 'time out' to neutralize her feelings for Gouvernail. Rather, she is preparing a conscious decision to allow herself to feel sexually attracted to another man. She proposes, "wholly from herself" (RW, 336), to invite Gouvernail again. Her husband shows himself to be "surprised and delighted" (RW, 336) that she has "overcome" (RW, 336) her dislike for his friend. Her response is filled with ambiguity:

> "Oh," she told him, laughingly, after pressing a long, tender kiss upon his lips, "I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him." (RW, 336)

Has she merely overcome her dislike and her sexual desire for him? Or has she overcome all scruples regarding adulterous passion? In the absence of a clear textual directive, the reader is left to draw his/her own conclusions. As Janet Beer says: "The two latter interpretations hang suspended as possibilities above the story" (Beer, 51). Chopin chose to use an open, ambiguous ending. It allowed her to be daring and immoral in her acceptance of adulterous desire, while remaining within the bounds of propriety, which was a firm requirement for publication.

The ambiguity of the story's ending makes different readings possible. Despite the fact that there is nothing explicit in the text to indicate firmly that Mrs. Baroda plans to be anything other than the irreproachable wife and hostess, Mrs. Baroda's remark can be interpreted as a sign that she intends to make use of Gouvernail's next visit to seduce him. This reading is in line with Chopin's continuous discussion on the nature of love and her "quarrel" (Bender 1992, 99) with Darwin on the role of women in the process of sexual selection. I contend that, in Mrs. Baroda, Chopin created a female character who is aware of her own sexual desire and whose response is not passive, but assertive, in a constant play of attraction and repulsion. Significantly, Mrs. Baroda seems to respond solely on the basis of "an indefinable current of magnetism."[43] There is no extenuating circumstance in the form of an unhappy marriage; the Barodas are depicted as a loving, harmonious couple. As a result, Mrs. Baroda resembles one of the Maupassantian heroines who indulge in sexual relations merely to fulfil their own desires and needs and can be regarded as one of Chopin's most audacious characters.

The Storm

Whereas in "A Respectable Woman," the adulterous desire is momentarily arrested and the contemplated transgressive act – it is suggested – is postponed, "The Storm" explicitly describes the remorse-free enjoyment of sexuality in an illicit relationship. "The Storm" is undoubtedly Chopin's most daring short story on female adultery. The story, which was written in 1898, is a sequel to "At the 'Cadian Ball" written in 1892 (Toth 1999, 205). In the earlier story Bobinôt, Calixta, Alcée, and Clarisse are all unmarried and fighting for each other's attention. Bobinôt, who is characterized as "big, brown, good-natured," but also as "dull-looking and clumsy" (CB, 302), is in love with Calixta, who has Spanish blood in her veins, and whom the Acadian community therefore forgives for "much that they would not have overlooked in their own daughters or sisters" (CB, 302). Bobinôt knows that he cannot really compete with the handsome Creole planter Alcée Laballière, who is also attracted to Calixta. The two flirt openly and there is "a breath of scandal" (CB, 302) surrounding a trip to Assumption. Calixta is flattered by the attention she gets from "M'sieur Alcée," as she addresses him, and perhaps half hopes that his

[43] See note 37.

intentions are serious. However, she knows that he is not likely to marry a girl of her class and that her future lies with a man like Bobinôt, whose long-standing proposal she accepts when she realizes that Alcée is in love with his beautiful cousin Clarisse.

Chopin continued the story of these four characters six years later by reintroducing them in "The Storm." The story is also set five or six years later, which takes the characters beyond the boundaries of the story world and implies that they have had an existence outside their literary one. I am not suggesting that Chopin perceived of her characters as real human beings, but she was evidently interested in further exploring the possibilities which their interrelations offered her, hoping that readers would remember the four protagonists. Although it is interesting to see how reading "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm" together enhances the understanding of the latter short story, "The Storm" can also be read by itself.

In "The Storm," which consists of five parts, Chopin employs a third-person narrator, who recounts the events of a summer afternoon with detachment and no apparent desire to be judgemental, but whose narrative stance reveals a clear moral stand with regard to adulterous love and sexual relations. In part I of "The Storm," Bobinôt is shopping with his four-year old son Bibi. Compared to the character we meet in "At the 'Cadian Ball," he has matured into a caring family man. The third-person narrator emphasizes the loving relationship between father and son. Bobinôt is said to be "accustomed to converse on terms of equality with his little son" (S, 592), and when a sudden thunder storm forces them to postpone their going home, he knows how to reassure the little boy about his mother's well-being: "Bibi laid his little hand on his father's knee and was not afraid" (S, 592). Bobinôt's confidence in and devotion to his wife are indicated by his impulsive purchase of a can of shrimps, which he knows she likes. Although it is only a brief scene, the third-person narrator manages to create a picture of a caring and stable young family. This is affirmed by the opening of part II, in which the scene shifts to the house where Calixta is sewing, unaware of the approaching storm.

In "At the 'Cadian Ball," the "little Spanish vixen" Calixta (CB, 302) is described as a wild and sensuous creature, with "the bluest, the drowsiest, most tantalizing [eyes] that ever looked into a man's," and a voice "like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan" (CB, 302). When she reappears in part II of "The Storm," Calixta is presented as a diligent housewife, unprepared for an encounter with her former sweetheart, Alcée. He is just passing her house when the storm breaks and politely asks her to allow him shelter on her porch. But when the rain comes down "with a force and a clatter that threatened to break an entrance and deluge them there" (S, 593), he enters the house. There is no suggestion of premeditation in Alcée's visit, but not much is needed to arouse in him "the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh" (S, 594). The two give in to their mutual desire as the thunderstorm rages outside. Critics have admired the unusual directness with which the love-making is recounted. The explicit references to

Calixta's naked body and the somewhat hyperbolic, but unambiguous language in which the lovers' sexual fulfilment is described made the story unacceptable for publication at the time it was written. Chopin was well aware of this, especially after *The Awakening* had met with such disapproving criticism, and she never even submitted the story for publication.[44] "The Storm" shows that Chopin felt she had more to say on the subject of women's need to assert their desire for sexual fulfilment.

The climactic scene in part II of "The Storm" is followed by three short scenes, in which we are told what happens afterwards. In part III, Bobinôt and his son Bibi are returning home. The narrator tells us with gentle irony that Bobinôt is worried about being scolded by Calixta for their lengthy absence and their muddy appearance as they enter the house "prepared for the worst – the meeting with an over-scrupulous housewife" (S, 595). The reader knows that Calixta has a lot more to feel guilty about than Bobinôt, but there is nothing to indicate that she feels any remorse. The family sit down to dinner and we are told "they laughed much and so loud that anyone might have heard them as far away as Laballière's" (S, 596). This rather curious reference to Alcée's plantation is so specific that it cannot be ignored. Yet in the absence of any comment on the part of the narrator, it is difficult to interpret it. It appears to be Calixta's symbolic signal to Alcée that their afternoon tryst has not disturbed the happiness of her marriage and that he need not worry about it having unpleasant consequences.

Part IV describes Alcée writing a loving letter to his wife that same night, telling her not to hurry back home from her trip; although he misses her and the babies, "their health and pleasure were the first things to be considered" (S, 596). We are told that "[i]t was a loving letter, full of tender solicitude" (S, 596), and yet it is difficult to believe that he is only thinking of *their* well-being. Lawrence Berkove claims that "[i]t is fairly clear that he hopes for a repeat performance with Calixta" (Berkove, 192). The final part of the story supports this reading, for in part V, Clarisse, reading her husband's letter, is said to be pleased that she is not expected back soon, for the trip is "the first free breath since her marriage" and "[d]evoted as she was to her husband, their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while" (S, 596). Again the narrator refrains from any judgemental comment on Clarisse's barely veiled relief at being allowed to spend more time away from her husband.

Chopin's choice of narrative point of view in "The Storm," and more specifically in part II of the story, is significant with regard to the moral issues that she addresses. Part II opens with the third-person narrator's description of Calixta as she sits behind her sewing machine. We are given only the merest hint of how Calixta feels. She is apparently not worried about the safety of her husband and child, and she is seen to concentrate on the job at hand. When she goes outside to take in her husband's Sunday clothes, she sees Alcée riding in through the gate. The narrator tells us that "[s]he had not seen him

[44] "The Storm" was first published in 1969.

very often since her marriage, and never alone" (S, 593). However suggestive the addition "and never alone" may seem to be, we are not told how Calixta feels about seeing Alcée again. As soon as the scene moves to the inside of Calixta's house in part II, the narrator employs Alcée in a focalizing capacity, revealing Alcée's perception and consciousness. The layout of the small house is described, as if the reader, together with Alcée, enters it for the first time. The attention is drawn to the bedroom, "with its white monumental bed, its closed shutters," making it look "dim and mysterious" (S, 593), which clearly suggests Alcée's awareness that his unexpected meeting with Calixta has an erotic dimension. It is also at this point that the narrator gives a description of Calixta, painting the difference between the girl Calixta, who confidently transgressed the boundaries of class and propriety by accepting Alcée's attentions, and the present-day Calixta, who is a young wife and mother:

> She was a little fuller of figure than five years before when she married; but she had lost nothing of her vivacity. Her blue eyes still retained their melting quality; and her yellow hair, dishevelled by the wind and rain, kinked more stubbornly than ever about her ears and temples. (S, 593)

Given at this point in the story, and not for example when Calixta is first introduced, the description focuses on comparing the Calixta that Alcée flirted with years ago with the present Calixta, whose sensuality and attractiveness have not diminished in his eyes.

It is Alcée who takes the initiative in seeking physical contact, which she at first tries to avoid: "'*Bonté!*' she cried, releasing herself from his encircling arm and retreating from the window, 'the house'll go next!'" (S, 594). But Alcée persists and as he takes Calixta into his arms, the narrator emphasizes the effect of "[t]he contact of her warm palpitating body" (S, 594): "Her white neck and a glimpse of her full, firm bosom disturbed him powerfully" (S, 594). The narrative stance emphasizes the traditional male dominance in sexual relations: it is Alcée who seduces Calixta. Even if Calixta's response is equally passionate, Chopin clearly wanted to avoid the suggestion that Calixta, as a woman, and moreover a married one, is in a position to initiate sexual relations. We are told about Alcée's moral deliberations in this somewhat precarious situation in a brief passage of psychonarration. He is reminded of the time Calixta and he once spent together in Assumption. But whereas her youth and virginity had then been a deterrent, her maturity seems an invitation:

> "Do you remember – in Assumption, Calixta?" he asked in a low voice broken by passion. Oh! she remembered; for in Assumption he had kissed her and kissed and kissed her; until his senses would well nigh fail, and to save her he would resort to a desperate flight. If she was not an immaculate dove in those days, she was still inviolate; a

> passionate creature whose very defenselessness had made her defense, against which his honor forbade him to prevail. Now – well, now – her lips seemed in a manner free to be tasted, as well as her round, white throat and her whiter breasts. (S, 594)

This passage is often read as a reference to Calixta's status as a married woman. Lawrence Berkove therefore finds Alcée's reasoning "faulty."[45] If Alcée's sense of honour instructed him not to take advantage of a virgin, he should have been even more restrained in dealing with a married woman, "to whom the commandment of adultery applied" (Berkove, 191). Berkove's reasoning betrays a judgemental attitude that would not look amiss in the period from which "The Storm" dates. He argues that the passage is part of the narrator's conscious attempt to throw an unfavourable light on the lovers' moral stance. Although he agrees that the description of the passionate sex that follows "is indeed impressive" (Berkove, 191), he does not interpret it as a celebration of adulterous love. Janet Beer on the other hand argues that marriage is "the enabling principle of the spectacular sex they have" (Beer, 62). The lovers "can only enjoy each other because they are married – to other people" (Beer, 62). I want to suggest a somewhat different reading of this psychonarrated passage, for there is no mention of Calixta's marriage, or of the fact that Alcée is a married man, for that matter. At this point in the story, the narrator is not interested in the transgressive nature of their adulterous encounter, but rather, to use Chopin's own words, in the "indefinable current of magnetism" between the two and the "uncontrollable emotion" which determines their actions.[46] That is why the ensuing love-making is described in such glowing terms and without a hint of a moral judgement. Indeed, it is suggested that a wrong is being corrected, for we are told that Calixta's "firm, elastic flesh [. . .] was knowing for the first time its birthright" (S, 595), thereby suggesting that Calixta's marriage is not sexually satisfying. It is not clear whether Chopin wanted to suggest here that a woman has a right to sexual gratification and the right to find it outside marriage, if necessary. It seems more likely that Chopin wanted to stress the role of physical attraction in the relationship between men and women, which in a nineteenth-century context represented a controversial view in itself.

The love-making is described as an exhilarating experience that leaves both lovers happy and fulfilled and utterly free from regrets, at least for the moment. There is only a subtle reference to their awareness of the danger of discovery, when the narrator concludes: "The rain beat softly upon the shingles, inviting them to drowsiness and sleep. But they dared not yield" (S, 595). When the rain has passed, Calixta watches Alcée ride off: "He turned and smiled at her with a beaming face; and she lifted her pretty chin in the air and laughed aloud" (S, 595). The narrator's stance in this part of the story is

[45] Lawrence I. Berkove, "'Acting Like Fools': The Ill-Fated Romances of 'At the 'Cadian Ball' and 'The Storm,'" *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin,* ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996) 191.

[46] See note 37.

decidedly less distant than in the first part of the story, or in the remaining parts; it is in fact the only part of "The Storm" where we can observe the narrator taking a position with regard to the moral dimension of the narrated events.

As in "A Respectable Woman," the adultery is not motivated by an unhappy marriage. There is a suggestion that the relationship of Alcée and Clarisse, like that of Calixta and Bobinôt, is not successful on all fronts, but both couples are depicted enjoying a harmonious married existence. The protagonists allow themselves to be guided by a physical need for sexual gratification, without thinking for once about the moral implications of their actions. The narrator refrains from making any judgemental remarks, ending the story, as Nancy Walker remarks, "on a placid note:"[47] "So the storm passed and every one was happy" (S, 596). This concluding line has been interpreted in radically different ways by Chopin critics. According to Lawrence Berkove the final sentence of the story should be read ironically. "Reading it 'straight' would not only ascribe to Chopin anachronistically liberal attitudes, it would also create a host of problems that she was too good a writer and thinker to have avoided" (Berkove, 192). Bobinôt and Bibi may be happy, but only by virtue of the fact that they are ignorant of Calixta's deception. The same goes for Clarisse, who is shown to be not overly fond of her husband anyway. "Surely," Berkove argues, "Chopin cannot be seriously characterizing such deceptions as happiness" (Berkove, 192). Calixta and Alcée's happiness is only temporary, and it is "highly unlikely that Chopin seriously meant to categorize their act of sudden and blind passion as divine love, as acceptable love, or as anything worthy of the name of love" (Berkove, 190).

Most critics, however, read the story as testifying to Chopin's progressive attitude towards sexuality and read the final line as a matter-of-fact conclusion, without any ironic undertone. Beer argues that "the sexual encounter, like the storm, has released the tensions which afflict the atmosphere in both marriages" (Beer, 61) and that Chopin wanted "to communicate none of the more complicated emotions that might follow the storm" (Beer, 62). Seyersted finds that the story shows Chopin's "completely detached attitude toward generally accepted moral ideas" (Seyersted, 164), but he concludes that the ending "is of course ambiguous" (Seyersted, 166). Rather than ambiguous, I would prefer to call the ending neutral. Chopin's narrator reveals sympathy and understanding for the revived erotic attraction between Alcée and Calixta and has not coloured the description of their afternoon together with references to the adulterous nature of their affair. The nature of their respective marriages is hinted at, but there is no indication that the events of the afternoon will have any effects on the lovers' married lives, either positive or negative. Speculations about the ultimate consequences of Alcée and Calixta's renewed involvement, would take us outside the story world and the narrator clearly does not want to do that. If the ending is

[47] Nancy Walker, "Her Own Story: The Woman of Letters in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction," *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin,* ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996) 118.

perceived as ambiguous, that is because we are tempted to consider a future for these fictional characters, perhaps more so, because their revival in "The Storm" after their initial appearance in "At the 'Cadian Ball" suggests extra-fictional continuity. However, when we interpret the text as it stands, we cannot but accept that the final line means exactly what it says. The adulterous encounter is not justified, but in view of nineteenth-century moral standards, it is perhaps more significant that it is not condemned.

In both "A Respectable Woman" and "The Storm," the female protagonists, incited by physical desire, are seen to be sexually assertive. Whereas in the former story, the sexual boldness of Mrs. Baroda is only hinted at, in "The Storm," Calixta is seen to act upon her sexual desire without much inhibition. In these stories, Chopin appears to assert the freedom of women to enter into sexual relationships on the basis of sexual attraction. She uses the female adultery motif to demonstrate that women's decision to accept their feelings of sexual desire and to act upon them could have a profoundly liberating and stimulating effect. These stories, and in particular "The Storm," offer rare examples of the explicit representation of sexuality in short stories by American writers and, as such, demonstrate Chopin's exceptional position among her contemporary colleagues.

4.5. "Her lover in the dark": Religious imagery in Kate Chopin's short stories[48]

In the previous section, I referred to Chopin's contribution to a newspaper article which raised the question: "Is Love divine?" Chopin's response revealed her controversial views on the relationship between sexuality and religion, which also inspired her to employ religious imagery in relation to sexuality and sexual emotions. As Janet Beer points out: "Chopin often drew similarities between the feelings engendered by the rituals of the church with those of sexual arousal" (Beer, 47).[49] Her recurring flirtations with religious symbols and practices in her fiction reveal her personal fascination with Christianity and particularly Catholicism. Chopin, who was raised a Catholic, was not devoutly religious. She took a more liberal stand on several issues than the Catholic Church allowed (Seyersted, 85; Toth 1999, 135). Yet she appears to have found certain aspects of the religious experience interesting, if not always appealing. The way in which she employs religious imagery in her female adultery stories suggests that she was critical of the Church as an authority. More subtly subversive are her frequent references to religious practices and to

[48] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from one of Kate Chopin's journals, entitled "Impressions," reprinted in KCCP, 179-194; this citation, p. 182.

[49] See also Thomas Bonner, Jr., "Christianity and Catholicism in the Fiction of Kate Chopin," *Southern Quarterly* 20.2 (Winter 1982): 118-125. Bonner discusses the pervasive influence on Chopin's work of Catholicism and Christianity, stimulating Chopin to both conform and rebel.

the Bible in describing the sexual satisfaction which women achieve in extramarital relationships.

In her 1894 diary, the only journal from her adult years that has survived, she writes about a visit to one of her childhood friends, who had entered a convent. "Those nuns seem to retain or gain a certain beauty with their advancing years which we women in the world are strangers to," she writes (KCPP, 181). She admires her friend's youthful appearance and suggests she owes this "perpetual youth" to her devotion to Christ, whom Chopin refers to as "her lover in the dark." She admits that she herself has also had lovers, "lovers who were not divine," and that "the stamp which a thousand things had left upon my face" was no doubt clearly visible (KCPP, 181-182). She seems to have envied the total abandon with which women were allowed to surrender to religious passion, while women's desire for sexual gratification was still not something that could be admitted to openly. In "Two Portraits," a story juxtaposing the lives of a nun and a prostitute, the nun not only experiences spiritual, but also physical ecstasy in contemplation of the "God-Man, the Man-God" (CW, 797). However, for Chopin, convent life was "a phantasmagoria" (KCPP, 182), which could not compete with real life.

In "A Lady of Bayou St. John," Madame Delisle opts for a withdrawal from sexual reality, when she decides to devote her life to the memory of her dead husband. When her lover Sépincourt comes to declare his love after allowing her a period of mourning, she receives him, sitting beneath the portrait of the dead Gustave, adorned with his sword, his scarf and "an embankment of flowers" (LBSJ, 300). Sépincourt instinctively recognizes its religious connotations and feels "an almost irresistible impulse to bend his knee before this altar, upon which he saw foreshadowed the immolation of his hopes" (LBSJ, 300). Madame Delisle's widow weeds resemble a nun's habit, and as she greets him, "precisely as she had welcomed the curé" (LBSJ, 301), nothing betrays her former sexual attraction to the Frenchman. Sépincourt feels crucified upon her altar of religious devotion and, with a reference to the soldier's lance being thrust into Jesus's side, the narrator remarks that the scorned lover wonders "why she did not take the sword down from her altar and thrust it through his body here and there" (LBSJ, 301). Madame Delisle's life of devotion keeps her young, as it had Chopin's friend, and she becomes "a very pretty old lady" (LBSJ, 302), who every year has a solemn high mass said for the repose of her dead husband's soul. There is a subtle sexual innuendo in the narrator's conclusion "[t]he memory of Gustave still fills and satisfies her days" (LBSJ, 302). This early story mildly satirizes the substitution of religious devotion for romantic love.

In her later stories, religious imagery is used more directly in relation to sexual feelings. In "Her Letters," as I pointed out above, the rituals of the Holy Communion are used to describe sexual ecstasy. The adulteress eats a piece of a letter written to her by a former lover as if it were a host, tasting it "between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel" (HL, 399). The letters are a source of "spiritual nourishment" (Beer, 45), for we are told that

"she had been feeding upon them" (HL, 398) and "they had sustained her, she believed, and kept her spirit from perishing utterly" (HL, 398). But handling them also allows her to relive the sexual fulfilment which she found in the relationship: "This man had changed the water in her veins to wine, whose taste had brought delirium to both of them" (HL, 399). As Beer points out: "As she has gone outside marriage for this consummate experience, [. . .] she must impose her own shape or form upon the memory of the affair; within her locked room she enacts the ceremony which has kept her alive; its physicality, its ecstasy are contained by the worship of the relics of her passion" (Beer, 47). For the terminally ill woman, the reliving of her adulterous love affair is a religious experience, which appears to give her more comfort than religion itself.

The Biblical book, *Song of Solomon*, generally accepted as a celebration of love, formed an inspiration for a scene "The Storm," in which adulterous lovers enjoy a mutually felt sexual attraction while the rain drenches the world outside. The celebratory nature of the sexual encounter of Calixta and Alcée is underlined by the use of the language and imagery borrowed, as both Per Seyersted and Janet Beer point out (Seyersted, 166; Beer, 60-61). It even "provides a motif for the tale: 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it'"[50] (Beer, 61). When the lovers say goodbye, Chopin's narrator remarks that "[t]he rain was over; and the sun was turning the glistening green world into a palace of gems" (S, 595), echoing *Song of Solomon*'s "For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone" (Song Sol. 2:11). There are indeed many such verbal echoes. The likening in *Song of Solomon* of the beloved to a dove, as in "thou hast doves' eyes" (Song Sol. 1:15 and 4:1), but also in "my dove, my undefiled is but one" (Song Sol. 6:9), is used in "The Storm" in connection with the young Calixta: "If she was not an immaculate dove in those days, she was still inviolate" (S, 594). And there are other words from *Song of Solomon* that "reverberate through the account of Calixta and Alcée's love-making – 'pomegranate', 'lily', 'fountain', 'spring', 'breasts', 'chamber'" (Beer, 61). The recurrent references to Calixta's whiteness, – "her white neck," "her round, white throat and her whiter breasts" (S, 594), "as white as the couch she lay upon" (S, 595) and "[h]er firm, elastic flesh," which is "like a creamy lily" (S, 595) – all recall the frequent use of the lily as a symbol for the beloved in *Song of Solomon*. The emphasis on the colour white, with its usual association with innocence and purity, can be interpreted as emphasizing that this moment of passion should not be viewed as morally reprehensible.

In the association of the religious and the sexual in stories like "Her Letters" and "The Storm," Chopin saw a way of giving expression to the power of the sexual experience for women in terms that were identifiable for her nineteenth-century reading public. At the same time, the analogy between religious and sexual ecstasy would have been daring, even blasphemous in the eyes of Chopin's contemporaries and shows her defiance of accepted moral

[50] Song of Solomon 8:7.

standards. Her choice of imagery emphasizes her unique place in the contemporary literary landscape, at a crossroads where Walt Whitman meets Emily Dickinson. In particular, the use of religious imagery in Chopin's later stories, which link the mystery of religious and spiritual devotion to the natural, instinctive love in sexual relationships, shows her defiance of contemporary literary traditions, especially those in women's writing.

4.6. Conclusion

Kate Chopin began writing in 1889 and her last story dates from 1902, which means that she was active as a writer for some thirteen years. Compared to Edith Wharton's literary career, Chopin's was relatively brief. All the same, her contribution to American literature can be regarded as significant. Modern audiences have appreciated the way in which she addresses issues which were relevant in terms of the public debate about the role of women in both turn-of-the-century and modern society and which consequently sparked recognition among twentieth-century feminists. In the eyes of her contemporaries, however, Chopin continuously skirted the borders of what was deemed acceptable. She did not want to use her work to express agreement with the accepted social and moral views of contemporary society, as some of her precursors had done, nor was she content with the authorial image of regionalist writer which she had acquired at the start of her career. She consequently took up the challenge to find brave publishers who were interested in the kind of work which she wanted to produce and with whom she preferred to be associated.

In the initial phase of her career, she used the popularity of regionalist literature in order to have a market for her short stories. Although she initially did not intend to write in the regionalist tradition, she was induced to employ this literary subgenre of the short story, because it proved easier to get work of this type published. Chopin discovered that the nineteenth-century literary market offered excellent possibilities for women writers, as long as they conformed to the expectations that the reading public and publishers had of their work. She probably saw the advantages that the genre offered, in that it allowed her to address issues which would not normally be considered appropriate to be discussed in fiction. Chopin appears to have had an ambivalent attitude towards her image of a regionalist writer all of her life. However, she had no intention of allowing herself to be restricted by its limited scope, which, as becomes evident from her critical work written in the early 1890s, she found too parochial and insufficiently aware of the "very, very big world" (CW, 691).

She sought inspiration by studying the short stories of her literary example Guy de Maupassant, who encouraged her to address female sexuality with an openness which was unprecedented for her time, and she tried to

widen her literary scope by offering her short stories to more progressive publishing firms, thus hoping to reach more liberal readers. Chopin appears to have been aware of a tension between, on the one hand, her wish to be read and be successful as an author, and on the other hand, her determination to find a literary form which allowed her to do justice to the female experience and thus contribute to the public debate on the role of women in society. Her experiences with publishers and the critical response to her work taught her that her views were too liberal for a wide audience.

Before she started working on *The Awakening*, she had already begun to write stories for her third collection, *A Vocation and a Voice*. The collection as a whole is characterized by stories which do not have a distinctly regional setting, but could be set anywhere. Many of them are frank in their depiction of sexuality. At this stage of her career, Chopin took conscious steps to leave behind the nineteenth-century tradition of American women's writing. She took advantage of gradually changing literary tastes and the rise of an avant-garde literary market, aimed at more progressive readers who did not reject fiction that reflected important developments in contemporary society. As a result of her ill-advised decision to return to the genre of the novel in order to address the controversial topics which she was interested in, she lost the popularity which she had gained as a short story writer. Her relatively early death, within five years of the publication of *The Awakening*, prevented her from rebuilding a career which had had such a promising start.

Chapter 5

The chosen interpreter
Narrative techniques in Edith Wharton's female adultery stories

In a letter to her editor Rutger B. Jewett, dated 21 February 1923, Edith Wharton mentions that she is considering "the writing of my own early memories," in order "to avoid having it inaccurately done by someone else after my death" (LEW, 465). She took up the idea about a decade later and completed her memoirs in 1933, four years before her death. It was meant to be, in the words of Walt Whitman, "[a] backward glance o'er travel'd roads."[1] In this book, which takes not only take its epigraph, but also its title – *A Backward Glance* – from Whitman, Wharton gives a rather anecdotal account of her life. It is a highly reserved book, in which she allows only occasional glimpses of her emotional life. Wharton's decision to pre-empt future biographers indicates that she was well aware that her fame as a writer had created a public interest in her person. She wanted to control, however, how she would be regarded by others and to confirm the picture that the world had of her: that of a privileged, if parentally restrained, daughter of New York's upper class, who turned herself into a cosmopolitan and a successful writer, surrounded by the *crème de la crème* of society and a few carefully selected intellectual friends.

Wharton was nearly seventy years old when she started writing *A Backward Glance*, and because she sometimes had trouble recalling details of her past life, she regularly called in the help of her friend Gaillard Lapsley for confirmation of facts. In a letter to Lapsley she complained about her forgetfulness and said she feared resembling "the pathetic case of the old lady confessing over and over again her one adultery."[2] Of course "her one adultery" is exactly what Wharton did not confess to in *A Backward Glance*. In fact, her lover Morton Fullerton is not mentioned at all in the book, and the failure of her marriage to Edward 'Teddy' Wharton and the ensuing divorce are dismissed in a few sentences. Even in the final years of her life, Wharton refused to admit publicly to personal experience with extramarital affairs.

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[1] Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982) 656.

[2] Lewis quotes from a letter to Gaillard Lapsley, which is not included in his edition of Wharton's letters (Lewis, 503).

Adulterous desires and relationships feature repeatedly in her fiction, however, and her interest in the subject of illicit sexuality has been widely acknowledged. Some literary critics have been eager to point out the influence that events in her personal life had on Wharton's choice of subject matter and have pointed out biographical incentives for writing about transgressive sexual relationships.[3] However, I concur with Jessica Levine, who points out that Wharton, like James, wanted "to introduce European themes, notably the theme of illicit love, to an American establishment that, in certain regards, was as Victorian in Wharton's maturity as it had been in James's youth" (Levine, xi). I will argue that Wharton, like Chopin, was primarily interested in the subject of female adultery for artistic reasons, and that it demonstrates Wharton's desire to view her own writing as part of a literary tradition which extended beyond the borders of America, not only geographically, but also socially and morally.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how Edith Wharton employed one of the most important motifs of nineteenth-century European literature in her short stories. I will focus on Wharton's use of the female adultery motif in the light of her position as an author in the contemporary literary field. All too conscious of the laws of the literary market place, she made a number of strategic choices to make her female adultery stories acceptable for her puritanical readership. She refrained from explicit and even implicit references to the sexual motivation of her female protagonists, and she did not depict the adulterous affair as a way of escaping from the restrictions of patriarchal society to find emotional and spiritual fulfilment. The adulterous affair poses a momentary threat to the social order, but Wharton does not permit her adulteresses to break free.

In the first section of this chapter, I will consider Wharton's views on her craft, as expressed in *A Backward Glance*, and I will discuss how her non-fiction contributed to the authorial image which she wanted to construct. In the second section, I will examine Wharton's use of the female adultery motif in her novels and her attittude towards the censorious literary climate in which she worked. Subsequently, I will focus on her female adultery stories. In five subsections, I will argue that these stories reveal that she applied sophisticated writing techniques which also gave her the tools to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the literary market. I will first show how Wharton uses narrative point of view to allow her readers to identify with or to understand the perspective of the protagonists in her female adultery stories. I distinguish three point-of-view strategies, which I will deal with in the first three subsections. Firstly, she uses male first-person narrators who, in relating the story of an adulterous relationship, emphasize the isolated position of the adulteress in a society that lives by an elaborate set of written and unwritten

[3] See for example: Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York, [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1977) 379-380; Barbara White, *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York, [etc.]: Twayne Publishers, 1991) 40-52; Gloria C. Erlich, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (Berkeley, CA, [etc.]: University of California Press, 1992) 31-45, 86-109, 124-147.

laws and conventions and that aims at maintaining the *status quo*. Significantly, all of the female adultery stories that have first-person narrators are stories that have a distinct 'ghostly' atmosphere. Secondly, Wharton occasionally disregards her own principles with regard to the unity of focalization and introduces a shift in perspective to throw an alternative light on the adulterous affair. Thirdly, Wharton uses third-person narrators that consistently provide a highly internal view of the female protagonist, thereby allowing the reader to witness what is going on inside the head of the adulteress. In the fourth subsection of section 2, I will propose that Wharton's application of closure in her short stories underlines her view that the social system in which her characters function is so commanding that it is impossible to withdraw from it. Her use of point of view in combination with her choice of closure does not grant her readers the reassurance that existing social relations have been restored after the momentary disruption caused by the adulterous affair, but instead creates a profound sense of disturbance. In the final subsection, I will discuss Wharton's use of imagery in her female adultery stories. Inspired by her lifelong interest in architecture and interior decoration and in travelling, Wharton's imagery can be regarded as complementary, symbolizing, on the one hand, the narrow-minded hypocrisy of a patriarchal society in which Wharton's adulteress feels herself to be entrapped, and on the other hand, the adulteress's desire to escape, both literally and figuratively, from the restrictions imposed on her.

In analysing Wharton's stories, I will refer to what she wrote about her technique in *The Writing of Fiction*. Although Wharton also expressed her opinion on the technical aspects of fiction writing in other essays and reviews, this short book represents the essence of Wharton's views on her own craft. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she recognizes point of view as an important narrative device for the structuring of her fictional texts and sets out her principles for its effective use. She also expresses a distinct opinion on the importance of the beginnings of short stories, although she remains a little vague about the demands placed upon their endings. By systematically referring to *The Writing of Fiction*, I do not mean to investigate whether Wharton practised what she preached or to expose any inconsistencies in the way she applied her own theoretical principles. Her endeavour to explain the theoretical principles behind her writing shows, however, that Wharton approached her writing as a serious craft and that she had the ambition to contribute to the formation of a theory of fiction. Unlike Kate Chopin, who wanted to perpetuate an image of herself as a nonchalant and intuitive writer, Edith Wharton was keen to establish a reputation as an author who was in full control of her craft.

5.1. "The wrong side of the tapestry": Edith Wharton and her authorship[4]

Edith Wharton devotes one chapter in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* to her writing. In this chapter, entitled "The Secret Garden," she describes "the story-telling process" as a combination of "that which concerns the technique of fiction (in the widest sense), and that which [. . .] one must call by the old bardic name of inspiration" (BG, 199).[5] The moment of creative inspiration, Wharton claims, "is as impossible to fix in words as that other mystery of what happens in the brain at the precise moment when one falls over the edge of consciousness into sleep" (BG, 198). Creativity, Wharton finds, can only lead to art when combined with the application of technique. She draws an interesting analogy:

> Every artist works, like the Gobelins weavers, on the wrong side of the tapestry, and if now and then he comes around to the right side, and catches what seems a happy glow of colour, or a firm sweep of design, he must instantly retreat again, if encouraged yet still uncertain. (BG, 197)

Wharton saw the creative process as something which an artist works at diligently, skilfully combining the techniques of his or her trade with the use of creativity, yet without knowing exactly how the completed work will turn out or what response it will generate. She always appears to have felt that her creativity was restrained, on the one hand, by the moral values of a society which condemned her authorship as inappropriate and by the laws of the literary establishment which controlled the publication of her work, and on the other hand, by her limitations as a writer to give expression to her ideas and views. Throughout her life, she worked hard at perfecting her craft, because it helped her to acquire the confidence that she could measure herself with the writers, most of them male, whom she admired. At the same time, she remained, in her own words, "if encouraged yet still uncertain" (BG, 197).

Edith Wharton's career as a published author stretches over a period of over fifty years.[6] Wharton was well aware of the fact that being a professional

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[4] For the citation in the title of this section, see BG 197.

[5] The chapter's title is a well-chosen metaphor for her authorship. With a reference to the famous children's book by Frances Hodgson Burnett, Wharton pictures her authorship both as private and intimate and as organic, yet controlled. In "The Secret Garden," she attempts to provide her readers with insight into her creative process. She wants "to depict the growth and unfolding of the plants in my secret garden, from the seed to the shrub-top" (BG, 198). The analogy which Wharton draws between her writing and a garden betrays her almost professional interest in gardens and gardening, and the belief that designing and developing a beautiful garden was a work of art, much like the tasteful designing and decorating of houses was. In Wharton's view, gardens were an extension of the house and therefore subject to the same architectural principles and were based on natural growth and flowering within a carefully designed structure and lay-out.

[6] I consider the publication of her adolescent poetry in 1878 as the start of Wharton's career as a published author. She continued to write until a few months before her death, in Augst 1937 (Lewis, 531; Lee, 748). Her last completed short story, "All Souls" was published posthumously,

writer was not considered a respectable occupation for a lady of the New York aristocracy to which she belonged. Those in her social environment frowned upon her initial success, and she admitted that her authorship met with "a thick fog of indifference, if not of tacit disapproval" (BG, 122). In her autobiography, she writes:

> My literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and in my own family it created a kind of constraint which increased with the years. None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame – they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten. Only one eccentric widowed cousin, living a life of lonely invalidism, turned to my novels for occasional distraction, and had the courage to tell me so. (BG, 143-144)

The response of Wharton's New York relatives and old friends can be considered an example of what I have termed dismissive censorship. Their, seemingly, deliberate disavowal of Wharton's fame and status as a writer undermined her ambitions in that field. The passage is humorously ironic and expresses Wharton's defiance of the mores of her social background, suggesting that, in the course of her literary career, she learnt to disregard the indifferent attitude of her New York 'tribe' towards her literary fame. It also suggests that Wharton always retained a sense of ambivalence towards her profession and that, even late in life, she found this deliberate uninterest very hurtful. R.W.B. Lewis says that "there remained something of the conviction drilled into her in old New York that it was improper for a lady to write fiction" and that she "sometimes sounded as if her writing were her entertainingly guilty secret" (Lewis, 298). Although Wharton professed that her authorship was of vital importance to her, a sense of impropriety appears never to have left her entirely, and her career always retained an aura of social scandal, not unlike, in fact, an adulterous affair.

Wharton was never entirely financially dependent on her work, since she earned a considerable income from inheritances and trusts. Her literary earnings were important, however, to maintain the high standard of living that she became accustomed to, and in some phases of her life this put considerable pressure on her work and her relationships with her publishers (Benstock, 393-395, 422-423). Wharton learnt to operate very effectively as a professional writer and developed into an astute businesswoman, who had a keen sense of the mechanisms of the literary market (Lewis, 297-298; Griffin Wolff, 223-224). The publication of her first novel released her from a social

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as were her collection of ghost stories *Ghosts* (October 1937) and the unfinished novel *The Buccaneers* (September 1938).

life which she had been forced to lead, since her reputation as an artist provided her with the opportunity to surround herself with people who shared her intellectual interests (BG, 120-122). Wharton rejected the kind of authorship aspired to by her mid-nineteenth-century precursors, who saw their writing as an extension of their domestic work, primarily aimed at expanding the feminine values of the domestic sphere. At the same time she wanted "to steer clear of the stigma of the ineffectual dilettante."[7] She therefore deliberately constructed an image of herself as a professional writer of fiction in the tradition of the major European writers. She did this in her critical writings by frequently discussing her own writing techniques in conjunction with the work of her European precursors and contemporaries. In addition, she maintained personal friendships with a number of her contemporary European colleagues and, once she had moved to Europe, she led a social life which brought her in frequent contact with the artistic elite of London and Paris.[8] She sought to support the image of the literary artist by simultaneously building up a reputation as a writer of non-fiction on subjects which revealed her intellectualism, her cosmopolitanism and her connoisseurship.

Edith Wharton had an almost professional interest in architecture and interior decoration, which she displayed in a number of non-fiction publications and which she used to create beautiful and pleasant homes that were famous for their good taste and their stylistic perfection.[9] She wrote two books on the subject, which were both published in the initial decade of her literary career: *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), written in collaboration with the architect

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[7] Amy Kaplan, "Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship," *ELH* 53.1 (Spring 1986): 436.

[8] In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton throughout draws analogies between her own work and that of a host of major European writers; see also my comment on Wharton's essay "The Great American Novel" in the introduction of this study. Wharton's biographers discuss her friendships with the circle of English writers and critics surrounding Henry James, after he settled down in England, and with important figures in the contemporary French literary *milieu*, such as Paul Bourget, André Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Paul Valéry (Lewis, 161-163 and 239-241; Lee, 243-252 and 287-305). In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes at length about the many new friends and acquaintances she made after she had left America to settle in Europe (BG, 213-292). In London, she claims to have moved among "fashionable cosmopolitans" (BG, 220) and to have met "a long line of men famous in letters and public affairs" (BG, 215), although she admits that she much preferred the company of a few close friends. In Paris, her new friends "came from worlds as widely different as the University, the literary and Academic *milieux*, and the old and aloof society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain" (BG, 258). Wharton is not averse to name-dropping; it is significant, however, that she apparently wanted to stress that, as an expatriate, she could become part of the kind of social circles that she was not allowed to move in while she lived in America. See also: Susan Goodman, "Edith Wharton's Inner Circle," *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, eds. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1993) 43-60. Goodman suggests: "Wharton wanted to be remembered in two traditions: one of mostly male English and European prose masters; the other of fascinating women" (56).

[9] Wharton's interest in and understanding of architecture and interior decoration have been commented on by several critics. The following studies have provided valuable background information on this subject: Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), Theresa Craig, *Edith Wharton: A House Full of Rooms: Architecture, Interiors, and Gardens* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1996), Sarah Luria, "The Architecture of Manners: Henry James, Edith Wharton, and The Mount," *American Quarterly* 49.2 (1997): 298-327, and Annette Benert, *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006).

Ogden Codman, Jr., and *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904). In these books she demonstrated her knowledge in areas which were considered part of the female interest sphere. Her approach was not typically feminine, however. *The Decoration of Houses* outlines her ideas on architecture and interior decoration, which she regarded as a branch of architecture, coining the term "interior architecture" (DH, 10). The book can be regarded as Wharton's manual on how to create a home that offers its inhabitants and their guests the spaces for both civilized social interaction and the possibility to withdraw from it. Her firm emphasis on architecture and construction, which were traditionally masculine professions, "can be seen as a strategy to circumvent the gender confinements of her society,"[10] and to support her wish, at this early stage in her career, to destroy her image of socialite.

Wharton not only wrote about houses, she also put her theories into practice in the decoration of her first marital homes in Newport and New York (Lee, 127-129), but especially in the creation of The Mount, the house which she had built in the early 1900s in Lenox, Massachusetts. The Mount reflects that, at the start of her literary career, Wharton made a conscious decision to invest in a home which not only befitted her social status, but which also offered her the physical conditions to pursue a career which was generally considered unsuitable for a woman of her social background. On the second floor, far removed from those parts of the house which were meant for social interaction, Wharton had a private apartment which could be shut off from the rest of the house. Corresponding to Virginia Woolf's 'room of one's own,' this is where Wharton could physically retreat into the world of her creative imagination. The Mount would not be her only architectural project. After she settled in France in 1910, she created two further homes: Pavillon Colombe, in St. Brice-sous-Forêt, near Paris, and Château Ste. Claire, in Hyères, on the Rivièra. The efforts she put into each project to turn the property into her ideal home show her determination to create the environment, both physically and spiritually, in which the conditions for becoming a professional artist and for acquiring her place in literary history were ensured.

Wharton's extensive travels through Europe and her intimate knowledge of France provided her with material for a number of non-fiction books on travelling and foreign culture and customs: *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), *Fighting France* (1915), *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), and *In Morocco* (1920). Mary Suzanne Schriber points out that Wharton's travels and her writing about them became "an act of self-discovery in which Wharton identified the intensity of her engagement with Europe and the degree to which Europe stimulated, excited, and energized her."[11] The above-mentioned books gave her the opportunity to display her knowledge and understanding of Europe and European, particularly French,

[10] Vanessa Chase, "Edith Wharton, The Decoration of Houses and Gender in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Architecture and Feminism*, eds. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996) 137.
[11] Mary Suzanne Schriber, "Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self-Discovery," *American Literature* 59.2 (May 1987): 260.

society and the authority to appraise the social structure of her home country in the light of her international experience.

Towards the end of her career, the emphasis in her non-fiction shifted to literary criticism, predominantly in the form of reviews, essays, and tributes, for a variety of newspapers and magazines. Her own fiction formed the subject of a number of prefaces to (re)publications of her work and the small volume of essays, entitled *The Writing of Fiction*. Frederick Wegener observes that "it is striking that a writer so articulate about the intricacies of her craft should have remained only sporadically active as a critic" (Wegener 1996, 3). He also points out that the production of *The Writing of Fiction* was a rather long and "perhaps discomfortingly retrospective" process.[12] He suggests that Wharton's modest contribution to literary criticism and the difficulties that she had in completing *The Writing of Fiction* can be attributed to the fact that Wharton felt that literary criticism was the domain of men and that she was never able to rid herself of her feelings of inadequacy and inferiority as a writer of criticism (Wegener 1995, 70-71).[13] This attitude may perhaps even be said to mirror a general sense of inferiority of women writers *vis-à-vis* their male colleagues. Her determination to complete *The Writing of Fiction* demonstrates that she wanted to confirm her position as an established and valued writer, who had something worthwhile to say about her craft. Taken together, Wharton's non-fiction represents a side of her writerly personality that she was keen to display, because it underpinned the reputation she aimed for as a writer of fiction.

Wharton was an expatriate for most of her adult life, but she continued to use American society as the main setting for and subject matter of her fictional work. Her female adultery stories are almost all set in America or deal with American expatriates in Europe. Heeding the advice of her friend Henry James to "do New York," she focused in her fiction on the morals and manners of the country of her birth and the way in which this rapidly changing society affected the lives of individuals, without, however, essentially improving the chances of women to escape from its rigid social and moral codes.[14] Despite the fact that she was a commercially successful author, who also acquired public recognition as an important contributor to American turn-of-the-century literature, Wharton never managed to totally disregard the opinion of her social peers, as the citation from *A Backward Glance* in the opening paragraph of this section shows. She left America to settle in France, constructing an environment, both physically in the form of houses and socially in the form of a circle of friends

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[12] Frederick Wegener, "Edith Wharton and the Difficult Writing of *The Writing of Fiction*," *Modern Language Studies* 25.2 (Spring 1995): 68.

[13] Wegener points out that Wharton's book was often compared to Percy Lubbock's book *The Craft of Fiction*, which was published four years earlier (Wegener 1995, 72).

[14] In response to "The Line of Least Resistance," Henry James had written: "I applaud, I mean I value, I egg you on in your study of the human life that surrounds you." *Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters, 1900-1915*, ed. Lyall H. Powers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990) 32. After the appearance of her historical novel *The Valley of Decision*, James wrote: "There it is round you. Don't pass it by – the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelist's that it waits for. [. . .] *Do New York!* The 1st-hand account is precious" (34). James's italics.

and fellow artists, which was much more conducive to her intellectual and artistic needs and ambitions than the New York society in which she had been born and bred. However, she appears never to have managed to dispel the qualms she had about her career as a writer, although she revelled in her success.

5.2. "I despair of ever understanding the point of view of the American public": Edith Wharton and the female adultery motif[15]

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton relates that her professional career began in "the days when a well-known New York editor, offering me a large sum for the serial rights of a projected novel, stipulated only that no reference to 'an unlawful attachment' should figure in it" (BG, 126). She recalls that her friend Charles Eliot Norton implored her to remember that "no great work of the imagination [had] ever been based on illicit passion" (BG, 127). Wharton was evidently well aware of the controversial status of female adultery as a literary subject. In the early chapters of *A Backward Glance*, she recounts how the supposedly harmful influence on especially young and/or female readers of literature that dealt with risqué subjects had caused her mother to forbid her to read all contemporary fiction and to put her on a strict literary diet of the Old Testament, the Elizabethans and Jacobeans, and Keats and Shelley. Looking back, Wharton concludes:

> But I am sure that great literature does not excite premature curiosities in normally constituted children; and I can give a comic proof of the fact, for though "The White Devil", "Faust" and "Poems and Ballads" were among my early story-books, all I knew about adultery (against which we were warned every week in church) was that those who "committed" it were penalized by having to pay higher fares in travelling: a conclusion arrived at by my once seeing on a ferry-boat the sign: "Adults 50 cents; children 25 cents"! (BG, 73)

This funny childhood recollection exudes the delight of an adult at youthful innocence, but it is also an implicit comment on nineteenth-century censorship practices with regard to controversial subjects, which she had to deal with throughout her career.

Despite her literary interest in illicit, and more specifically adulterous love, Wharton did not write her version of *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*. She opted for a more restrained and conservative approach to the subject of female adultery and, in doing so, proved to be more cautious than her contemporary

[15] The citation in the title of this section was taken from a letter, dated 23 May 1921, from Edith Wharton to Rutger B. Jewett. The letter is cited by Levine (60).

and compatriot Kate Chopin, who challenged the American literary establishment with her novel *The Awakening*. As Jessica Levine argues in her study of female adultery in the work of Henry James and Edith Wharton: "[b]y eschewing the traditional adultery plot of a married woman's seduction and shame, James and Wharton compromise with the stringent code of propriety practiced by their publishers" (Levine, 13). As in many contemporary English and American novels, adultery occurs at the fringe of Wharton's plots, and the novels in which it is a more central issue, such as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Reef*, and *Ethan Frome*, deal with adulterous husbands rather than wives.

Levine argues that Wharton did not choose to be so reticent with regard to the use of adultery in her novels because she did not know or did not want to write more openly about transgressive love. She draws attention to surviving outlines and unfinished manuscripts among the papers in the Wharton Archive at the Beinecke Library, which suggest that Wharton's "creative process clearly included the explicit if private formulation of ideas for stories that would have been difficult to publish" (Levine, 41). The most striking of the documents that Levine is referring to is no doubt the "Beatrice Palmato fragment," which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Levine indicates that one of Wharton's notebooks contains an outline for Wharton's later novel, *The Age of Innocence*, in which Newland Archer and the mysterious Ellen Olenska run off together after Newland's marriage to May, only to return to New York to take up their old lives when they get tired of the affair (Levine, 41). In her insightful discussion of this novel, Levine argues that Wharton's decision not to use this plot development was "undoubtedly a concession to the marketplace" (Levine, 149), but that Wharton "turned market constraints into literary advantage by using a tame plot about unconsummated desire to critique the familiar adultery plot of French fiction" (Levine, 149). Whereas in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* the traditional female adultery plot is transported to an American setting, Wharton uses elements of it to create an innovative version of the European novel of female adultery. Thus, Newland Archer is presented as "a male Emma Bovary" (Levine, 149), whose life, like that of his European female counterpart, "has been formed by his reading of sexually exciting works of European romanticism and realism" (Levine, 149). He wants to escape from the constraints imposed upon him by the restrictive society of 'old' New York, suggesting that the social restraints of society could be as stifling for men as for women. However, Ellen Olenksa does not want to be part of his fantasies, partly because she refuses, as Archer's mistress, to become both a cultural and literary stereotype. *The Age of Innocence* became "an eminently respectable novel that conformed to the editorial standards of decency of her day" (Levine, 181), because Wharton does not allow her lovers to find happiness together. Instead, she shows how they continue to lead their separate lives, more or less content with their fates. The novel can thus be read as "a response to the European novel of adultery" (Levine, 149), or indeed a successful attempt to integrate it into the American literary tradition. The "uneasy peace" (Levine, 181) which Newland Archer and

Ellen Olenska make with New York society can be said to mirror Wharton's own relationship with her home country. While Wharton's voluntary expatriation is echoed in Ellen's escape to Europe, her cooperation with the American literary establishment, if at times recalcitrant, resembles Archer's acceptance of the social mores of New York society (Levine, 181).

The Age of Innocence was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, an award for an American novel which best presented "the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood" (Lewis, 432-433). In a letter to Sinclair Lewis, Wharton wrote: "when I discovered that I was being rewarded – by one of our leading universities – for uplifting American morals, I confess I *did* despair" (LEW, 445; Wharton's italics). She was evidently disappointed at the failure of her critics to see beyond the surface of the novel's plot and to recognize her criticism of 'old' New York's manners and morals. It reveals an attitude towards fiction on the part of the American literary establishment which chose to apply dismissive censorship, as I have termed it, when confronted with the expression of views which were considered unacceptable. Wharton may have despaired at this practice, but at the same time, she accepted it and devised literary strategies which allowed her to draw "stylistic advantage from the limitations placed upon [her] by the market" (Levine, xii).

Levine also draws attention to Wharton's correspondence with her editor at Appleton, Rutger B. Jewett, with whom she discusses, at some length, the issue of self-censorship (Levine, 60-64). When her novella *The Old Maid* (1922) was turned down by a number of magazines, because its topic of illegitimacy was considered too "vigorous" (Levine, 60), Wharton wrote to Jewett: "I despair of ever understanding the point of view of the American public." She added: "I think too well of the tale to wish to have it hawked about, and if the next editor to whom you offer it is equally prudish, I should prefer to have you return it."[16] In their ensuing correspondence on the matter, Jewett patiently reminded Wharton of the puritanism of the American reading public, which still largely determined the attitude of publishers towards submitted work that dealt with daring and controversial subjects. Levine quotes a list of magazines which Jewett sent to Wharton, detailing their attitude towards various topics, particularly sex, and suggests that Jewett "must have intended to encourage Wharton to temper her writing for the sake of both her popularity and her pocketbook" (Levine, 63). She concludes that the range of magazines that would be prepared to accept Wharton's franker stories seems fairly limited. Wharton complained about the "editorial timidity" which she often encountered, but she claimed never to have given in to requests to censor her own work (BG, 139). Levine has found "no written evidence that Wharton consciously decided to adjust her fiction to the parameters Jewett drew for her" (Levine, 64). She points out, however, that,

[16] See note 15. *The Old Maid (The 'Fifties)* was later included in *Old New York* (1924), a collection of four novellas.

after the discussion with Jewett on censorship, Wharton avoided explicit references to sexuality in her fiction.

Levine only discusses Wharton's longer fiction. However, in terms of the female adultery motif, Wharton's short stories are particularly interesting.[17] Despite her obvious awareness of the restrictions of the literary market with regard to controversial subjects, in her short fiction she did not refrain from depicting female protagonists who feel trapped in marriages that are based on social convention and a rigid moral code and from addressing the underlying issue of women's search for emotional and sexual fulfilment. Just as she devised literary strategies to enable her to deal with adultery in her novels, as Levine argues, Wharton also made a number of deliberate choices to enable her to introduce female adultery in her short stories, without endangering chances of publication. Thus, she shows restraint in suggesting sexual motives of her adulteresses and does not suggest that the adulterous affair is an effective way of breaking free from the restrictions of patriarchal society.

5.2.1. "The sympathizing intermediary": The disposition of first-person narrators in Wharton's ghost stories[18]

Wharton recognized the importance of point of view as a narrative technique and was aware of its function in manipulating the reader's interpretation, as becomes clear from her analysis in "Telling a Short Story," chapter 2 of *The Writing of Fiction*. In the introduction to *Ethan Frome*, the only Wharton novel narrated in the I-form, she also reflected on this subject. The fact that she felt compelled to justify her "scheme of construction" (IEF, 260) in an introduction suggests that she considered the use of a first-person narrator only rarely

[17] I do not discuss all of Wharton's short stories which involve female adultery. In each of the subsections into which this and the next chapter are divided, I have chosen to use a limited number of short stories to illustrate my argument. Some short stories, as a result, are only discussed briefly or merely mentioned in this thesis. A few narratives remain undiscussed. In one of her older short stories, "A Cup of Cold Water" (1899), the adultery of the female protagonist is addressed with almost uncharacteristic openness. Unlike most of Wharton's fictional characters, the adulterous wife in this story is not from the upper classes. It seems that Wharton implicitly accepted the generally held view that women of a lower social class were more sexually active than women from the higher social classes and that they were therefore more likely to display adulterous behaviour. Wharton's most sexually explicit novel, *Summer*, also features a lower class heroine. Two of the novellas which are included in *Old New York* also feature adulterous wives. Wharton makes sure, however, that the adultery occurs only at the fringe of the narrative or is redeemed. In *The Spark (The 'Sixties),* Leila Delane's adulterous behaviour is not a central issue. In *New Year's Day (The 'Seventies),* the female protagonist, Lizzie Hazeldean, is ostracized from the high social circles of New York because of an extramarital affair. Many years later, the narrator learns that Lizzie in fact prostituted herself in order to raise enough money to make the final days of her ailing husband as comfortable as possible. She moreover converted to Catholicism in order to expiate her sin.

[18] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from Edith Wharton, Introduction, *Ethan Frome*; reprinted in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 259-261; this citation, p. 260. Subsequent citations from this introduction are indicated with IEF, followed by the page number from this edition.

suitable. She explains that her choice "met with the immediate and unqualified disapproval of the few friends to whom I tentatively outlined it," but she defends it by saying that "while an air of artificiality is lent to a tale of complex and sophisticated people which the novelist causes to be guessed at and interpreted by any mere looker-on, there need be no such drawback if the on-looker is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple" (IEF, 260). Such a narrator is merely a "sympathizing intermediary" (IEF, 260). Wharton felt fewer scruples about employing a first-person narrator in her short fiction: three of the four novellas in *Old New York* and 22 out of her 86 short stories have a first-person narrator.[19] This suggests that she felt that brevity and compactness were prerequisites for the successful use of a first-person narrator.

In almost all cases, as Elsa Nettels points out in her article "Gender and First-Person Narration in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction," Wharton's first-person narrators are male.[20] They, "without exception, are equal or superior to the other characters in social position, and usually hold themselves superior in intelligence and accomplishment" (Nettels, 247). Nettels offers a number of reasons for this remarkable predilection on Wharton's part. She maintains that Wharton had a "persistent view of literary creation as a man's vocation" (Nettels, 248) and that she was influenced by the predominant literary tradition of male narrators. She furthermore suggests that the cultivated bachelor narrator had many counterparts in Wharton's own circle of friends and that she therefore easily identified with the masculine perspective. Wharton may have felt that it granted her a greater distance to her subject matter, an effect which she considered of great importance since "the mind chosen by the author to mirror his given case should be so situated, and so constituted, as to take the widest possible view of it" (WF, 36). And "[s]uch a mind for Edith Wharton," Nettels concludes, "was a man's mind" (Nettels, 249). Barbara White agrees with Nettels, in so far that "[t]he use of a first-person narrator, especially one who functions solely as observer, increases the distance between the author and her material. The narrator's belonging to the other sex also makes for greater distance, and this is the most common explanation for Wharton's preference for male narrators" (White, 63). Wharton's preference for male narrators is mirrored in her persistent use of the masculine (possessive) pronoun in connection with the author in *The Writing of Fiction*. Although we should beware of exaggerating the significance of this practice, it is an

[19] I am basing the total number of 86 on the stories published in the two volumes of *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, ed. R.W.B. Lewis (New York: Scribner's, 1968). Subsequent citations from Wharton's short stories have been taken this edition and are indicated by the abbreviated title of the story, followed by CSS + the volume and page number.

[20] Elsa Nettels, "Gender and First-Person Narration in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction," *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, eds. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992) 245-260. Nettels counts 22 short stories with a first-person narrator, only three of which are women. She includes "The Looking Glass" in this group. Although most of this story is related by a first-person narrator, its opening paragraphs have a third-person narrator, which, strictly speaking, makes Mrs. Antlee an embedded narrator, rather than a first-person narrator of the story as a whole.

indication that Wharton felt that writing, whether fictional or critical, gained in authority when it was produced by a male author and that the same applied to the narrative act when it was associated with a male voice.

Significantly, seven of Wharton's 22 short stories with a first-person narrator are ghost stories, which constitutes about half of her total output of ghost stories.[21] This suggests that she considered the first-person narrator particularly appropriate for stories in this genre. Three of Wharton's female adultery stories have first-person narrators: "The Duchess at Prayer" (1904), "Kerfol" (1916), and "The Long Run" (1912). Only the first two are generally listed with Wharton's ghost stories, although "The Long Run" also has some 'ghostly' elements. I will argue that Wharton chose to combine the female adultery motif with the genre of the ghost story to exploit the fact that the motif and the genre shared certain mutually supportive features, in particular the story's setting and the emphasis on secrecy. I will also argue that the choice of a first-person narrator in these stories reveals Wharton's intention to arouse or enhance the reader's understanding of the female protagonist. The gender of the narrators, male in all three cases, emphasizes the dominant role of patriarchal society in women's lives and accentuates the female protagonist's isolated position, enhanced by the Gothic setting of the stories. The isolation and oppression of the female protagonist invites the reader's sympathy for her, in spite of her (supposed) transgressive behaviour.

"The Duchess at Prayer" and "Kerfol" are the most evident examples of ghost stories which employ the female adultery motif.[22] Although Dyman points out that "Wharton provides no discussion of the themes of any of her ghost stories" (Dyman, xiii), both she and Fedorko recognize the important role of male-female relationships and marriage in these stories. Fedorko argues that in Wharton's ghost stories marriage is "what causes fear and distress" (Fedorko, 17) and "is apt to be the very source of the threat against a woman because it controls her sexuality and sometimes even kills her" (Fedorko 17). Dyman concludes:

> Presented sympathetically as victims of male domination, the codes of the marriage institutions, and internal conflicts between prescribed gender roles and their own needs, the women, lacking outlets for personal expression, live as estranged, silent, and often sexually repressed individuals. (Dyman, xiii-xiv)

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[21] There is no general agreement on which of Wharton's stories ought to be classified as ghost stories. Two fairly recent studies on Wharton's ghost fiction, Kathy Fedorko's *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* (Tuscaloosa, [etc.]: The University of Alabama Press, 1995) and Jenni Dyman's *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1996) agree that thirteen stories are ghost stories. Of these the following stories have a first-person narrator: "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Lady's Maid's Bell," "The Eyes," "Kerfol," "Miss Mary Pask," "The Looking Glass," and "All Souls."

[22] There is a definite suggestion that Mrs. Brympton in Wharton's ghost story "The Lady's Maid's Bell" has a more than Platonic friendship with Mr. Ranford. As the story does not hinge on this possibly adulterous affair, I have chosen not to include it in my discussion.

The ghost story is particularly suitable for the introduction of the female adultery motif for a number of reasons. The traditional backdrop for ghost stories, remote and inhospitable houses, form the perfect setting for stories about women who are forced to live secluded, unhappy lives, in which jealous and vengeful husbands take on the role of the Gothic villain. Moreover, the ghost story and the female adultery motif share as a key element the importance of secrecy. The adulterous relationship needs to be kept secret because it is a transgressive act, which generally puts a certain amount of strain on the affair. Yet, at the same time, adultery may derive some of its allure from the fact that it is a guilty secret. I will return to this in the next chapter. Similarly, ghost stories often revolve around something which cannot be seen or understood and which needs to remain illusive because the uncanny atmosphere which the ghost story attempts to create depends on just that.

Wharton discusses the writing of ghost fiction in *The Writing of Fiction*, but especially in her preface to a collection of her ghost stories, *Ghosts*, published posthumously in 1937. She opens this preface by repeating the "pointless question often addressed by those who are incapable of feeling ghostly influence."[23] The best answer to the question "Do you believe in ghosts?" is, according to Wharton: "No, [. . .], but I'm afraid of them" (PG, 270). She emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the narrator of a ghost story and its reader, arguing that "there are no ghosts, but only tellers of ghost-stories" (PG, 273). The quality of a ghost story depends, according to Wharton, on "its thermometrical quality." "[I]f it sends a cold shiver down one's spine," she says, "it has done its job and done it well" (PG, 270). The use of a first-person narrator is of considerable importance in achieving this effect. S/he undergoes, or has undergone, the confrontation with the supernatural and, in telling about it, invites the reader to share this frightening experience, thus repeating or prolonging its effect. The frequent use of first-person narrators in her ghost stories demonstrates that Wharton considered this a particularly effective combination.

There are of course successful ghost stories that have a third-person narrator, who uses the responses of the story's characters to the supernatural occurrences or appearances to convey a feeling of fear or apprehension. More often, however, "the Gothic fantasy is a tale retold, memory turned into narrative, rather than action embodied in narrative."[24] In case of a first-person narrator, the recounting of the supernatural is influenced directly by his/her attitude towards it. The narrator may be very impressionable and anxious about what is happening, or alternatively highly sceptical and imperturbable. While reading the story, the reader will have to determine in a continuous process how to interpret the narrator's words and attitude, and decide on the

[23] Edith Wharton, Preface, *Ghosts*, 1937; reprinted in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 270. Subsequent citations from this preface are indicated with PG, followed by the page number from this edition.

[24] William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago, [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 46.

degree of reliability of the narrator. This mechanism is in itself not unique to this genre; the reliability of the narrator is a crucial aspect of narration in general.[25] However, since the events in a ghost story transcend that which is rationally understandable, the extent to which the narrator succeeds in transferring his/her feelings towards the supernatural onto the reader ultimately determines the degree to which the story as a whole succeeds in convincing the reader. In employing a first-person narrator, the writer has an extra tool at his/her disposal to influence this.

The Duchess at Prayer

In "The Duchess at Prayer," Wharton exploits the embedded first-person narrator's inability to interpret the available information on the adultery of the female protagonist by having him present the evidence of her transgressive behaviour as pieces of a puzzle which the reader is invited to put together. The supernatural twist at the end of the story, the transformation of the Duchess's statue, serves as the final piece of the puzzle, which allows the reader to see the complete picture of the adulteress's affair and its gruesome consequences.

The narrator of "The Duchess at Prayer" remains nameless and, in fact, barely comes to life. We cannot even be certain that he is a man, until he, in part II of the story, is addressed as "sir" (DP/CSS 1, 230). The narrator evokes the setting of an old deserted Italian house, surrounded by gardens and vineyards, although his presence there is not explained. However, in conveying to the reader the horror of the events that make up the story of the house's inhabitants, his role is essential. His main function is to introduce and provide an audience for an embedded, male, first-person narrator, who takes over the narrative role at an early stage in the story.

The house once belonged to Duke Ercole II, who one day brought home a young and vivacious Venetian bride. The story of their marriage is related by an old man, who acts as the narrator's guide on a tour of the house. It is the statue of the kneeling Duchess Violante in the private chapel, with its face expressing "a frozen horror" (DP/CSS 1, 231), that raises the visitor's curiosity and forms the incentive for the old caretaker to recount the events that took place there long ago. Wharton was almost certainly thinking of Robert Browning's narrative poem "My Last Duchess" when she wrote this story, but "The Duchess at Prayer" especially owes a lot to Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche," a story which Wharton knew and greatly admired, in particular for its use of multiple narrators. As she says in *The Writing of Fiction*: "In that most perfectly-composed of all short stories, "La Grande Bretèche," Balzac showed what depth, mystery, and verisimilitude may be given to a tale by

[25] See for example: Tamar Yacobi's work on this subject in: "Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem," *Poetics Today* 2.2 (Winter, 1981): 113-126; "Narrative Structures and Fictional Mediation," *Poetics Today* 8.2 (1987): 335-372; and "Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator's (Un)Reliability," *Narrative* 9.2 (May 2001): 223-229.

causing it to be reflected, in fractions, in the minds of a series of accidental participants or mere lookers-on" (WF, 67).

In Balzac's story, the narrator Monsieur Bianchon discovers an old deserted house, La Grande Bretèche, and learns about its former inhabitants through the accounts of a series of embedded narrators: the overly confident notary Monsieur Regnault, the gossipy inn-keeper Madame Lepas, and the maid Rosalie. The story of what happened in the house is told from various points of view, and with each change of narrator we get a different emphasis. At the same time, we get to know the individual narrators, through the way in which they tell their side of the story, but more importantly through the comments of their solitary audience, Monsieur Bianchon. He admits to nearly falling asleep listening to Monsieur Regnault, but his romantic curiosity is awakened by Madame Lepas's story; his decision to summarize Rosalie's story, rather than to reproduce her words exactly, is an implicit, yet clear, comment on her qualities as a narrator. In Balzac's story, the alternation of the witnesses' narratives is clearly marked, as is the role of the narrator, who, according to Wharton, "grouping these fragments in his own more comprehending mind, [. . .] finally gives them to the reader in their ghastly completeness" (WF, 68). In "The Duchess at Prayer," the old caretaker also bases his story on the reports of multiple witnesses, but these have been intricately interwoven, so as to make the individual voices largely inaudible, thereby placing a larger emphasis on the qualities and peculiarities of the embedded narrator.

We are immediately given every reason to question the reliability of this embedded narrator, for the old man is not a first-hand witness to the events, but instead bases his account on what he was told by his grandmother, who was the Duchess's serving girl. The visitor rightfully expresses incredulity: "Your grandmother? Two hundred years ago?" (DP/CSS 1, 232). His remark functions as a signal to the reader, who is thus warned not to accept the guide's words at face value. The guide is confident, however: "She told me the story when I was a little boy. She told it to me out there in the garden, on a bench by the fish pond, one summer night of the year she died. It must be true, for I can show you the very bench we sat on. . . ." (DP/CSS 1, 232). The grandmother's trustworthiness as a source of information, however, is equally debatable, for she was "a mere slip" (DP/CSS 1, 233) when the events related in the story took place and she was moreover not a first-hand witness herself, but had to rely on the information of servants that were closer to the Duchess. The old man acknowledges the influence that time and place may have had:

> It's possible, you think, she may have heard from others what she afterward fancied she had seen herself? How that is, it's not for an unlettered man to say; though indeed I myself seem to have seen many of the things she told me. This is a strange place. No one comes here, nothing changes, and the old memories stand up as distinct as the statues in the garden. (DP/CSS 1, 233).

The lapse of time is not the only complicating factor. The grandmother's unreliability is caused by the fact that her colleagues were not always willing to share all they knew with her and she was too naive to interpret correctly what she saw and heard.

We are given the description of an evidently unsuccessful marriage between Duke Ercole, who is "a silent man, stepping quietly, with his eyes down, as though he'd just come from confession" (DP/CSS 1, 234) and the young Duchess, who is "as gay as a foal" (DP/CSS 1, 235). Her adulterous interest in the young Cavaliere, who is "beautiful as Saint Sebastian" (DP/CSS 1, 234), is understandable and the ensuing love affair is an expected development for the experienced reader. The many valuable clues which are scattered throughout the story, such as the Duchess's exceedingly good spirits, in spite of the departure of the Cavaliere, her sudden devotion and lengthy visits to her private chapel, her orders for the alteration of the entrance to the chapel's crypt, and the strange antics of the chaplain as he is trying to catch the adulterous Duchess and her lover in the act, leave the reader with no doubt as to what is going on. The grandmother, however, appears never to have discovered that her mistress and the Cavaliere were lovers and used the crypt for their secret trysts. The old man is conscientious in his reproduction of his grandmother's account, but he shows himself to be equally lacking in perception, as is emphasized by his rhetorical refrain "What do I know?" (DP/CSS 1, 232 and 233). Like his grandmother before him, the grandson is therefore not so much an unreliable narrator, as one lacking in interpretative skills.

The events are presented as clues in a detective story, and, by unravelling them, the reader is let in on the Duchess's secret. The reader is also led to infer that the Duke knows about his wife's transgression. When he suddenly returns home from one of his travels, bringing with him a stone statue of his wife which he intends to place over the entrance to the crypt, his seemingly casual remark that he ordered the statue six months earlier suggests that he has known about the affair for some time and has carefully constructed a plan to end it and simultaneously punish his wife. The premeditated nature of the Duke's revenge makes his actions seem even more horrific. The transformation of the Duchess's statue after the gruesome live burial of her young lover adds to Wharton's story a touch of the supernatural. The tragic fate of the Duchess is transfixed in the look of "frozen horror" (DP/CSS 1, 231) on her statue, which is transferred onto all those who see it, including the narrator. This feeling is augmented by the story of the Duchess's life, as it is kept alive by the old caretaker. The events acquire significance not only because they took place, but also because they are being recounted and therefore passed on across generations. The petrified horror of the Duchess makes it very difficult for the reader not to feel compassion for the adulterous young woman. Wharton thereby creates understanding for her defiance of the marriage vows, although she does not allow her to escape her gruesome end.

In the final part of the story, the visitor resumes his role as narrator. His response to the guide's story is rather subdued: "'And the crypt?' I asked. 'Has it never been opened?'" (DP/CSS 1, 244). His response indicates that he is impressed by the story that he has just heard and that the old caretaker has succeeded in bringing across his unease at the events which he has recounted but the significance of which he does not fathom. It remains unclear whether the visitor realizes what has really happened to the Duchess's lover. It is quite possible that he does not, that he too has been unable to interpret the clues correctly. As Elsa Nettels points out, Edith Wharton's male narrators frequently lack insight and "unwittingly reveal their obtuseness" (Nettels 1992, 252). I want to suggest that, in "The Duchess at Prayer," Wharton uses this ambiguity to create a special bond with the reader. In Tamar Yacobi's words, Wharton "makes communicative capital out of [her] agent's errors, omissions, misjudgments, and loss of control" (Yacobi 1987, 347). The reader is made to believe that s/he is more insightful than the story's two narrators and on a par with its author with regard to understanding and appreciating the events described.

Kerfol

The first-person narrator of "Kerfol" is more deliberately manipulative than the guileless embedded narrator of "The Duchess at Prayer." His gender-biased rendering of the female protagonist's story serves to alert the reader and invites him/her to interpret the narrator's account critically and to determine his/her own position with regard to the adulteress's role in the story's events. Although it was written sixteen years later, "Kerfol" is, according to Kathy Fedorko, enough like "The Duchess of Prayer," to be a deliberate revision of it (Fedorko, 66). Certainly both stories dramatize what Candace Waid refers to as a "psychosexual struggle."[26] In "Kerfol," the role of the first-person narrator is considerably more prominent than in "The Duchess at Prayer." He is a character in his own right and his views have a distinct influence on his narrative role. The opening paragraphs prepare us for the type of narrator that he is going to be. He acknowledges that he is seen as "a solitary-minded devil," but claims that his "unsociable exterior" hides "secret yearnings for domesticity" (K/CSS 2, 282). His self-confidence is shaken when he is confronted with the desolate house that his friends advised him to visit. When approaching the house, he is ill at ease and admits to "a sense of irrelevance, of littleness, of futile bravado" (K/CSS 2, 283) which he tries to combat with masculine assertiveness towards the pack of aggressive dogs that confront him. He thus conveys his uneasiness at the situation directly to the reader, forcing the reader to share the fear which he cannot deny.

[26] Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 184.

When he tells his host about his adventure, the latter presents him with "a shabby calf volume" (K/CSS 2, 287), containing an account of the Kerfol affair, dating from 1702. As in "The Duchess at Prayer," the reliability of the original source is questionable, since it was written about a hundred years after the events took place. Wharton's narrator is intrigued by the story of the young and beautiful Anne de Barrigan, who marries Yves de Cornault, a "rich and powerful noble, then in his sixty-second year, but hale and sturdy" (K/CSS 2, 288). When one night Yves de Cornault is found dead at the bottom of the stairs leading up to his wife's chambers, Anne is accused of having murdered him with the aid of Hervé de Lanrivain, who is believed to be her lover and accomplice. She denies any guilt and states that her husband was killed by the pet dogs which were given to her by her husband, who murdered them one after the other, each time he found that his wife had become too attached to them. She claims that, on the fateful night, the dogs, in their ghostly form, turned on their murderer.

The narrator at first wants to translate "the old record" (K/CSS 2, 288), but instead decides to render it "in a simpler form," omitting what he considers "wearisome repetitions" and "side issues" (K/CSS 2, 288). His rendering of the account is as a result not entirely reliable. He admits that it took him a considerable amount of effort to read it, because it was "long and closely printed" and "the type of the book was very bad. . ." (K/CSS 2, 288). The use of ellipsis suggests that he could not decipher the entire text and felt forced and at liberty to fill in the gaps himself. As Candace Waid suggests, "his story leads him beyond the boundaries of the courtroom document into the realm of fiction" (Waid, 186). He claims: "[N]owhere have I added anything of my own" (K/CSS 2, 288), but in editing the original text, he has continuously added his own judgemental evaluations. His interpretative reading has resulted in a story which reveals as much about its narrator as about its characters. He is shown to be highly biased towards the norms and values of patriarchal society and its judicial system. He introduces the Duke in positive terms. He acknowledges that the report mentions how "witnesses were found to declare" (K/CSS 2, 288) that during his absences from the estate the Duke was not the pious man that he appeared to be at home, but the narrator concludes that these statements are merely irrelevant rumours. He praises the Duke's courteous behaviour towards his wife and lightly steps over the fact that the Duke kept his young wife more or less locked up in the castle, for "no one was found to say that Yves de Cornault had been unkind to his wife" (K/CSS 2, 289). He dismisses the testimony of a servant-woman who had come upon Anne crying because she was still childless: "But that was a natural enough feeling in a wife attached to her husband; and certainly it must have been a grief to Yves de Cornault that she bore no son" (K/CSS 2, 290). The narrator's comment that "it was plain to all that he was content with his bargain" (K/CSS 2, 289) indicates that he considers the Duke's possessive attitude entirely acceptable. Despite the centuries that separate the Duke and the narrator, Wharton

appears to suggest, the attitudes of husbands towards their wives have not changed fundamentally.

The narrator's introduction of Anne de Cornault is remarkable, for he interrupts his rendition of the book's contents with a description of the young lady, taken from "a faded drawing in red crayon" (K/CSS 2, 289), which hangs in his friend's study. This gives the female protagonist not only a textual, but also a visual basis, which creates a sense of nearness that bridges the ages. The demurely portrayed Anne is more present than the other characters that appear in the book and she becomes a silent witness to the narrator's story. Nettels argues that "through the narrator's discovery of Anne's long buried history, Wharton foreshadows the modern scholar's recovery of forgotten women's texts" (Nettels 1992, 258). The narrator's role is much less positive than Nettels suggests, however. Throughout his account of Anne's trial he expresses doubts about the mental sanity of the "poor thing" (K/CSS 2, 291) and shows himself to be as biased as her male judges. He refers to her testimony as a "curious narrative" (K/CSS 2, 296) and is certain that it sometimes "must have sent a smile around the court" (K/CSS 2, 292) and that it was not "received without impatience and incredulous comment" (K/CSS 2, 296). Anne's claim that her husband killed all of her pet dogs is met with disbelief, by the judges as well as the narrator:

> It was an odd tale, certainly; but what did it prove? That Yves de Cornault disliked dogs, and that his wife, to gratify her own fancy, persistently ignored this dislike. As for pleading this trivial disagreement as an excuse for her relations – whatever their nature – with her supposed accomplice, the argument was [. . .] absurd. (K/CSS 2, 296)

Neither her contemporary judges nor the narrator of Anne's story several ages later appreciate the significance of the role of the dogs in the relationship between the Duke and his wife. The Duke points out to his wife that "[t]he dog is the emblem of fidelity" (K/CSS 2, 294), implying that she has to be deserving of it. By killing her dogs one by one, the Duke not only expresses his distrust, but also, bit by bit, kills her innocence and her fidelity to him. The revenge of the ghostly dogs is Anne's revenge for the destruction of her honour and faithfulness. Her moral victory is only symbolic, however, for she is not taken seriously and she ends her life as a "harmless mad-woman" (K/CSS 2, 300).

"Kerfol," according to Candace Waid, is one of Wharton's stories in which she "includes a reassuring motif: the discovery of the woman's words, which are read after her death by a sympathetic reader" (Waid, 191). The narrator in "Kerfol" may seem sympathetic to the fate of its female protagonist, but he also fails to take her seriously and considers her story puerile and insignificant. Fedorko rightly concludes that "[t]he narrator's abrupt dismissal of her with 'And so ends her story,' contradicts the connection the reader has established

with her and suggests that the narrator can't or won't face what he has learned about Anne's life and fate" (Fedorko, 68). As in "The Duchess at Prayer," Wharton establishes a bond with her readers by employing a narrator who lacks the perception and understanding that she trusts her readers will have. Wharton's readers are given various clues to infer the fallibility of the narrator of Anne's story, who is not really a 'sympathizing intermediary.' The reader's awareness of this incites him/her to interpret the narrator's story much more critically than when his reliability had not been questioned.

The Long Run

The role of first-person narrator in "The Long Run" is essential in giving the story a haunted feel, even though it is not a ghost story. His initial apprehension at finding his old friend so dispirited turns into understanding as he listens to the latter's story. As such he is perhaps the clearest example of Wharton's 'sympathizing intermediary.'

"The Long Run" is narrated by a nameless man who has recently made a renewed entrance into New York society, from which he has been absent for twelve years. At a dinner party, he runs into Halston Merrick, an old college friend. To the narrator's dismay, his friend is no longer the "vivid and promising figure" he once was, but has become a shadow of his former self, "conventional and dull" (LR/CSS 2, 303). Equally disconcerting is the changed appearance of the woman he once knew as Paulina Trant, who "used to be the one that stood out most" (LR/CSS 2, 304), but who now looks "[s]oft but blurred, like the figures in that tapestry behind her" (LR/CSS 2, 305). For the narrator, discovering his old friends among the dinner guests feels like coming upon two ghosts. He thus casts himself in the role of a character in a ghost story and he is recounting the events and encounters that have left him, if not frightened, then certainly uneasy. During an ensuing visit to Merrick's house, he remarks: "I was on his track, had come across traces of his passage here and there in the thick jungle that had grown up between us. But I had an odd poignant feeling that when I finally came on the man himself he might be dead. . . ." (LR/CSS 2, 306). The narrator's bewilderment and disappointment at finding his old friend so dispirited also arouses the interest in the reader to discover the reasons behind this change and places the narrator in the perfect position to be a 'sympathizing intermediary' between Merrick and the reader. As Nettels points out: "His readiness to listen disposes the reader to sympathy, which the protagonist's story may or may not dispel" (Nettels 1992, 250). The narrator becomes Merrick's solitary audience, as the latter takes over the role of first-person, embedded narrator in parts III, IV and V of the story and relates the story of his friendship with Paulina.

Merrick's account is not only a minute anatomization of his own position, but it also confronts his friend with a reality which he himself escaped. For the narrator, the return to the familiar faces and customs of New York is at first

pleasant and comforting, although he discovers that this society, with its rigid codes of behaviour, has the power of killing lively and rebellious spirits and that being part of it is tantamount to burying oneself alive. Even though this is not made explicit, the suggestion is that he realizes that he might have become like Merrick, if he too had remained in New York. He is at first not only disconcerted by the changes that have affected his friend, but he is also critical and angry at his friend for losing his youthful panache. However, Merrick's account of the past twelve years of his life forms an explanation that the narrator receives without further comment, although his listening presence is occasionally referred to. His silence is an indication of his acceptance of Merrick's evaluation, and in the course of the story he seems to merge with his friend and adopt both his dejection and his guilt. His role as the story's original first-person narrator as a result falls in with Merrick's, which is emphasized by his virtual disappearance from the story once Merrick has taken over the narrative role.

In telling his friend about the past twelve years, Merrick is confronted with the opportunities which he has failed to make use of. Just as his taking over the family iron foundry had been a "tame sequel to an inspiriting start" (LR/CSS 2, 302) of his career as an inspired thinker and poet, so his passionate devotion to Paulina has been reduced to a rather uncomfortable friendship, as a result of his inadequate reaction to "her headlong beautiful gift of herself" (LR/CSS 2, 320). When she turned up on his doorstep, announcing that she was prepared to leave her husband to be with him, Merrick did not dare to face the consequences of this impetuous decision. His reaction was dictated by fear of the unconventional and the inability to allow his feelings to guide his actions. He withdrew behind a verbose display of rationality and respectability and "the stereotyped gestures of the 'man of honor'. . ." (LR/CSS 2, 320), condescendingly rejecting her unconditional trust in her emotion:

> I felt in her [. . .] that lack of objective imagination which had always seemed to me to account, at least in part, for many of the so-called heroic qualities in women. When their feelings are involved they simply can't look ahead. [. . .] She had a specious air of knowing where she was going, but she didn't. She seemed the genius of logic and understanding, but the demon of illusion spoke through her lips. . . . (LR/CSS 2, 319)

His inability to disregard society's demands and expectations and to allow his personal ambitions and desires to govern his future, in the long run, have reduced both of him and Pauline to shadows of their former selves, as they allowed themselves to be sucked into the life that society had mapped out for them. As Merrick exclaims: "She conformed – I've conformed – the mills have caught us and ground us: ground us, oh, exceedingly small!" (LR/CSS 2, 307).

In recounting the events and the discussions leading up to and taking place on the fateful night of Paulina's visit to his house, Merrick ruthlessly

condemns his own behaviour, as becomes clear from interjections such as "poor fatuous idiot that I was!" (LR/CSS 2, 319) and "Oh, the sorry figure I must have cut!" (LR/CSS 2, 320). He at first tried to convince himself that his rejection of Paulina's proposal was completely justified: "all my weaknesses turned into merits! I had 'saved' a weak woman from herself, I had kept her to the path of duty, I had spared her the humiliation of scandal and the misery of self-reproach" (LR/CSS 2, 323). But he has had to acknowledge Paulina's superiority in handling the affair, for he realizes that what seemed to be an impetuous decision, to throw herself on his mercy, was in fact an intelligent way of providing him "with the decentest pretext a man could have for doing a pusillanimous thing" (LR/CSS 2, 323). Merrick's admission of his own failures and his self-condemnation may arouse the reader's sympathy, for he is shown to have accepted the responsibility for reducing Paulina to the unhappy, worn-down woman that we meet in the opening part of the story. Merrick concludes: "The long run, well, we've run it, she and I. I know what I've become, but that's nothing to the misery of knowing what she's become" (LR/CSS 2, 324). His belated insight does not, however, make him appear stronger or more dignified. He is a man to be pitied, but at the same time pitiful.[27]

Merrick is not only hard on himself; his descriptions of the other men in Paulina's life, who operate on the fringes of the story, are not very favourable either. Paulina's first husband is a "pompous stick" (LR/CSS 2, 309), "a man who always saw the small sides of big things," who "lived in bondage to a shadowy moral etiquette of which the complex rites and awful penalties had cast an abiding gloom upon his manner" (LR/CSS 2, 310). Her later husband is not much of an improvement, for although Merrick calls him "a very good fellow in his way" (LR/CSS 2, 324), he has been introduced as "a large glossy man with straw-colored hair and red face, whose shirt and shoes and complexion seemed all to have received a coat of the same expensive varnish," exclaiming "in a big booming voice: 'What I say is: what's the good of disturbing things? Thank the Lord, I'm content with what I've got!'" (LR/CSS 2, 305). In contrast with these far from progressive men, Paulina is presented as a liberal, courageous spirit. Through the extensive use of direct reported speech by the embedded narrator Merrick, the reader gets an uncensured report of Paulina's view of her life and marriage and of her future. She wants to make a clean break with her past and opts for a future with Merrick. She contrasts their love with the inconsequential affairs that she sees going on around her; a mere affair is not enough for her:

[27] "The Long Run" bears a striking resemblance to a story by Guy de Maupassant: "Étrennes" [A New Year's Gift] (1887). In the opening paragraphs of this story, the lover/narrator is seen attempting to write a farewell note to his married mistress. Unexpectedly she then turns up on his doorstep, insisting that he runs away with her, now that her husband has found out about their affair. He manages to convince her, and himself, of his love for her by praising her for her courage and determination in facing potential ostracism from society, and he accepts her offer. The story ends in a sudden twist, when the mistress announces that she has no intention of leaving her husband, but simply wanted to test her lover's devotion to her.

> I am not talking of the people who haven't enough to fill their days, and to whom a little mystery, a little maneuvering, gives an illusion of importance that they can't afford to miss; I'm talking of you and me, with all our tastes and curiosities and activities; and I ask you what our love would become if we had to keep it apart from our lives, like a pretty useless animal that we went to peep at and feed with sweet-meats through its cage? (LR/CSS 2, 317)

She is convinced that they are strong enough to withstand the opposition that they will have to face: "It's generally the weak heads that commit follies, when it's the strong ones that ought to: and my point is that you and I are both strong enough to behave like fools if we want to. . ." (LR/CSS 2, 317). Merrick's account thus highlights the difference between male and female attitudes in dealing with the restrictions of a normative society.

The gender of the narrators in "The Long Run" is significant. Nettels states that "it must not be supposed that Edith Wharton's male narrators [. . .] have more insight than women do. If anything, the opposite is true" (Nettels 1992, 251). In "The Long Run," however, we are confronted with male narrators who are shown to be very insightful. Merrick's awareness of his role in negatively determining not only his own, but also Paulina's life turns his story into a confession and forces his friend into the role of confessor, but also, as I have argued, into the role of accessory. The effect of Merrick's guilt-conscious narration is that it deepens the sympathy for the female protagonist. He does not only put himself in the dock, but together with him, the entire patriarchal society, of which Paulina is the undisputed victim. Whereas confessional narratives are generally aimed at explaining, even exonerating the behaviour of the confessor, Merrick's story only reinforces his guilt.

The male first-person narrators in Wharton's female adultery stories are an ill-assorted lot. However, the obfuscated narrator/auditor of "The Duchess at Prayer" and his talkative, somewhat obtuse narrating guide, the opinionated narrator of "Kerfol," and the sad and guilt-ridden narrator of "The Long Run" and his empathetic narrator/friend share a subject. They all, directly or indirectly, relate the story of a woman who is confined by the society in which she lives and for whom an adulterous relation forms a way of escaping from this confinement. With the exception of the narrator/auditor of "The Duchess at Prayer," who remains a shadowy figure, all narrators are highly subjective, putting their own, very distinctive marks on their stories. In each of these stories, an important effect of their narrative roles is that the reader's understanding of and sympathy for the female protagonist is aroused or enhanced. In "The Duchess at Prayer" and "Kerfol," the lack of insight of the narrators forges a bond between the reader and the author. In "The Long Run," the negative depiction of the male characters, of themselves and others, invites the reader to align him- or herself with the female protagonist. Wharton has thus created the conditions for the reader to become the 'sympathizing

receiver' of her tale. By presenting the reader with the male perspectives on the adulteress, Wharton shows how men talk about women and thus allows the reader to witness the gendered view of her narrators. In projecting nineteenth-century American moral standards on seventeenth-century France and Italy, as she does in "The Duchess at Prayer" and "Kerfol," she emphasizes the historical dominance of the patriarchal tradition and suggests that there has been no significant change in the position of women. Wharton's choice of narrators reflects the dominant perspective in nineteenth-century patriarchal society, which was definitely male. By suggesting that the male perspective is flawed, Wharton implicitly criticizes social norms.

5.2.2. "Who saw this thing I am going to tell about?": Shifting perspectives[28]

In order to achieve "[t]he effect of compactness and instantaneity sought in the short story," Wharton states in *The Writing of Fiction*, two unities should be observed: "the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes" (WF, 34). Wharton is here referring to what much later will be labelled the focalizer.[29] She advises writers to ask themselves: "Who saw this thing I am going to tell about? By whom do I mean that it shall be reported?" (WF, 35). Wharton considers it imperative to determine a satisfactory answer to this question, because "[i]t is clear that exactly the same thing never happens to any two people, and that each witness of a given incident will report it differently" (WF, 35). She explains that it is important

> never to let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally within his register. It should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, [. . .] and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and act exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter. (WF, 36)

Wharton's pronounced view on these narrative figures suggests that she had a clear idea about their role and function. The "character who serves as reflector" and the "reflecting mind" correspond with the focalizer, who is also the "chosen interpreter." Wharton's use of the term "story-teller" suggests that she is here referring to the narrator, but it is simultaneously her synonym for the writer.

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[28] The citation in the title of this section has been taken from WF, 35.

[29] The term was introduced by Gérard Genette. See: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) 189-194.

Although in her discussion on the subject of narrative point of view, Wharton uses the same or similar terminology for the writer and the narrator, this does not mean that she was not aware of the distinctive roles of these narrative figures.

Wharton was generally of the opinion that a shift in focalization should be avoided in the short story, since its narrative span is too short to allow it to be executed successfully. However, in some of her female adultery stories, "The Choice," "The Muse's Tragedy," and "Souls Belated," she did not heed her own advice to preserve the "unity of impression" (WF, 64). In "The Choice" (1908), the change of narrative perspective is not very effective. Although the story's ending may be successful in terms of the plot, the sudden shift in focalizer is in danger of negatively affecting the narrative balance.[30] Wharton uses this narrative device more effectively in two of her early female adultery stories, "The Muse's Tragedy" (1899) and "Souls Belated" (1899), which are both characterized by a somewhat distant approach of the narrator. In these stories, the shift in perspective occurs in the final part and serves to emphasize the difference between how the female protagonist sees herself and how others perceive her.

The Muse's Tragedy

In "The Muse's Tragedy," the shift in narrative perspective in the final part of the story serves to allow the female protagonist to correct the public perception of her extramarital relationship, which in the course of the story has also become that of the reader. The story is divided in three numbered parts; the first two parts of the story are narrated by a third-person narrator, who uses the male protagonist, Lewis Danyers, as a focalizer. The concluding part of the story, however, consists entirely of an unaddressed and unsigned letter, which is attached to the opening parts of the story as a huge appendix. The letter is, according to Denise Witzig, "the hinge of the narrative," for "it is at

[30] In "The Choice," Austin Wrayford, the lover of Mrs. Isabel Stilling, is the focalizer through whose eyes we see the scene of the dinner party at the house of the Stillings. He is also our 'guide' in the second part of the story, when the scene shifts to the boathouse, where, in absolute darkness, Wrayford and Isabel have agreed to meet and where she admits that she wishes her husband were dead. When Stilling unexpectedly turns up at the boathouse, he falls into the water. As Wrayford dives in to rescue him, there is a sudden shift of focalizer from Wrayford to Isabel. She reaches out for her lover, only to discover that it is her husband whom she ends up saving. Some critics have read this story, and particularly its violent ending, as reflecting Wharton's emotional life at the time of its composition. Wharton's marriage, which had never been very good, was becoming intolerable as Teddy Wharton's (mental) health started to deteriorate rapidly in this period (Lewis, 238 and 300-309; Lee, 350-351 and 368-377). R.W.B. Lewis claims that writing "The Choice" had "a good therapeutic effect upon Edith's creative energy" (Lewis, 228), because she had been able to vent some of her frustration at her own marriage in the story. It was, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "not one of Wharton's better efforts" (Griffin Wolff, 152). She claims that the experience of her own love affair with Morton Fullerton was still "too new in her mind, for her to return to the writing of fiction with mastery" (Griffin Wolff, 152). The story was written in 1908, but not published until 1916, as part of the collection *Xingu and Other Stories*.

this point that secrets are revealed and feelings are articulated."[31] As I pointed out in chapter 2, letters frequently play a crucial role in female adultery stories, usually in revealing the adulterous affair to the deceived husband. Generally the contents of these letters remain undisclosed to the reader; they can be deduced mainly from the husband's response to them. The letters confirm the suspicions of the wife's adultery and as such mainly function as a trigger to further the plots of stories that focus on the deceived husband. Kate Chopin's "Her Letters," as I have shown in chapter 4, is a notable exception, because it also shows the importance of the letters to the adulteress. In "The Muse's Tragedy," a letter serves to deflate the illusion of an adulterous affair.

In parts I and II, the narrator creates a picture of Mrs. Anerton as seen through the eyes of the young Danyers, an ardent admirer of the late poet Vincent Rendle and of Rendle's muse, Mary Anerton, who is generally believed to have been his mistress. Danyers has idolized Mrs. Anerton since his college days, and their meeting only deepens his regard for her. Danyers's uncritical admiration is set off against the picture that Mrs. Memorall, Mary Anerton's old friend, draws of her. Mrs. Memorall demystifies Mrs. Anerton, by providing Danyers with seemingly trivial details about her life, bringing her down to the level of mere mortals. She moreover informs him of the role that Rendle played in the lives of the Anertons. Her suggestion that Mr. Anerton "was much more ridiculous about" (MT/CSS 1, 69) his friendship with Rendle than his wife hints at the fact that the relationship between the poet and his muse was not what it seemed to be.[32] Danyers is shocked by the "rude fingering of his idol" (MT/CSS 1, 69) and refuses to adjust his idolized view of Mrs. Anerton. Perceiving the story through the eyes of the biased Danyers, the reader is tempted not to take Mrs. Memorall's words all too seriously. Danyers "contemptuously classifie[s] her as the kind of woman who runs cheap excursions to celebrities" (MT/CSS 1, 68) and he perceives of her "like a volume of unindexed and discursive memoirs" (MT/CSS 1, 70). However, the letter, which forms Part III of the story, shows that Mrs. Memorall's view of Rendle's muse is a lot closer to the truth than Danyers could surmise.

Even though there is no salutation or signature, we understand that the letter was written by Mrs. Anerton and addressed to Danyers. It becomes clear that time has elapsed and that the two have become romantically involved. He has proposed marriage to her, but she now writes to tell him that she cannot go through with the marriage and she discloses the true nature of her relationship with Vincent Rendle. In writing the letter, Mrs. Anerton assumes the role of first-person, embedded narrator. She admits that her love for Rendle remained unreciprocated and that their relationship was purely Platonic. She explains that, although her relationship with Danyers has briefly given her the feeling that she might yet escape her past, she knows that she is not

[31] M. Denise Witzig, "'The Muse's Tragedy' and the Muse's Text: Language and Desire in Wharton," *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, eds. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992) 265.

[32] In a later story, "His Father's Son," Wharton would again create a couple who have a close relationship with a renowned artist. I will discuss this story in chapter 6.

prepared to let anybody else take Rendle's place in her life: "I never had what I wanted, and never, never, never will I stoop to wanting anything else" (MT/CSS 1, 73). The end of the letter is also the end of the story. The original third-person narrator does not appear again, and we do not learn whether the letter was ever posted, delivered, or read by Danyers, whose reaction to its contents remains unknown. Even though Mrs. Anerton repeatedly addresses a 'you' that can only be Danyers, his role has become insignificant, because there will not be a future for the two. In fact, it is not Danyers who is the real addressee, but the reader. The primary function of the letter is not to tell the character Danyers the truth about the nature of the relationship between Mary Anerton and Vincent Rendle, but to disclose it to the reader.

Several critics have commented on the narrative role of the letter. Griffin Wolff says the letter confirms Mrs. Anerton's status of "the perfect, passive incarnation of femininity," which has been "reduced in the process, to the status of a friend, at best, and a convenient object, at worst" (Griffin Wolff, 103). In more recent analyses, however, Denise Witzig and Laura Saltz have argued that the letter represents a shift in the point of view which transforms Mary from a passive *objet d'art* into a subject in her own right. According to Witzig, the letter is "a truly subversive text," for in "breaking the silence in the letter, she [Mary Anerton] wrests control of her own meaning, speaks her desire, writes her own story" (Witzig, 266). Saltz argues that, through the shift in perspective, "the story revises and corrects Danyers's false perception of Mary, converting her from idol and work of art back to human being."[33] It is not only Danyers's view, however, but society's view of Mary Anerton that is being corrected.

In the first two parts, we view Mrs. Anerton through the eyes of the young and impressionable Danyers as the muse who inspired a well-known poet. However, he refuses to see her as a flesh-and-blood woman who would want to transform a poetic relationship into something as down-to-earth as marriage. Mrs. Memorall's suggestion, that Mary Anerton failed to make use of the chance to marry Rendle after her husband died, disgusts him. Similarly, as Mrs. Anerton indicates in her letter, society had also preferred to give their own interpretation to her relationship with Rendle. It was not judged by the same moral standards as other marital infidelities, and Mary Anerton was not vilified for her transgressive behaviour. On the contrary, it brought her fame and admiration:

> People began to talk, of course – I was Vincent Rendle's Mrs. Anerton; when the *Sonnets to Silvia* appeared, it was whispered that I was Silvia. Wherever I went, I was invited; people made up to me in the hope of getting to know him; when I was in London my door-bell never stopped ringing. Elderly peeresses, aspiring hostesses, love-sick girls and struggling authors overwhelmed me

[33] Laura Saltz, "From Image to Text: Modernist Transformations in Edith Wharton's 'The Muse's Tragedy,'" *Edith Wharton Review*, 19.2 (Fall 2003): 18.

> with their assiduities. I hugged my success, for I knew what it meant – they thought that Rendle was in love with me! Do you know, at times, they almost made me think so too? (MT/CSS 1, 75)

It becomes clear that Mrs. Anerton went very far in weaving her web of deceit. She admits to having edited Rendle's letters to her, when she prepared them for publication. By suggesting the deliberate censuring of the letters, through the deletion of romantic, or even erotic passages, Mrs. Anerton created her own illusion of an adulterous affair. I will return to this aspect in chapter 6, as part of my discussion on Wharton's rhetorical use of silence. Mrs. Anerton has sought to conform to the stereotype of the adulteress, whose transgression is disclosed through a lover's letters. Quite fittingly, Mrs. Anerton uses another letter to correct the image that has been created of her, not only by society, but also by herself. Her story reveals her as a flesh-and-blood woman and shatters the image of the enigmatic muse and, at the same time, that of Rendle as the "Great Man" (MT/CSS 1, 76). The shift in perspective in the final part of the story thus sets off the public image of both the female protagonist and her supposed lover against the facts as they were known privately.

Souls Belated

In the first four parts of "Souls Belated," the focus is on the female protagonist's perception of her present situation and her future. A shift in perspective in the final part of story serves to show the reader how, in contrast, society views her future as an adulteress and divorcee. It is exemplary of Wharton's bitter irony that society's views are presented through the eyes of the adulteress's lover.

When the story opens, we meet Lydia Tillotson and her lover Gannett on their European tour, following Lydia's decision to leave her husband. The female protagonist is used as the focalizer, as we watch them settle down in yet another hotel. It is through her eyes that we see the situation in which they find themselves when Lydia's divorce papers catch up with them. They can no longer avoid making decisions about their future. The reader is invited to share Lydia's emotional dilemma. When Gannett suggests that they should get married, she aggressively resists the idea, because to her "this sneaking back into a position that we've voluntarily forfeited" seems a "vulgar fraud upon society" and a "cheap compromise" (SB/CSS 1, 110). She does not want to give up her libertine existence, but the confrontation with another divorcee who is travelling through Europe with her lover makes her realize that her ideals about a life as "outlaws" (SB/CSS 1, 111) are untenable and she is prepared to leave Gannett rather than to compromise.

In the final part of the story, the narrative perspective suddenly changes from Lydia to Gannett. The opening paragraphs, in which he wakes up to the sounds in the adjoining hotel room and he visualizes Lydia's moving around,

explicitly place him the role of the focalizer.[34] This shift to Gannett as the perceiving consciousness is effective for a number of reasons. Gannett, watching Lydia from his window as she walks to the wharf to take the steamboat which will take her away from him and their future together, evaluates their relationship and their situation. In a scene that mirrors the opening of the story, in which Lydia sits observing Gannett in the train compartment, contemplating their relationship, the reader now gets to hear Gannett's side of the story. The reader is invited to join Gannett in wondering "Where would she go? What would her life be when she had left him?" (SB/CSS 1, 125). The scene emphasizes his helplessness, as he literally becomes an onlooker, who is unable to help Lydia get out of the "labyrinth of self-torture" (SB/CSS 1, 124) in which she finds herself. Lydia's dilemma is visualized as she moves "waveringly" (SB/CSS 1, 126) between the boat and the wharf. We do not need to share her deliberations, for in the course of the story she has already put into words her two alternatives: conforming or not conforming. Together with Gannett, we watch her take the decision not to leave him, but to face the kind of life she had hoped to escape.

The shift in perspective serves to underline Lydia's position, which is one of isolation and entrapment. We witness her solitary contemplation of the alternatives from a distance and see her not only as Gannett sees her, but also as society sees her, for the change in focalization also represents a transition in Gannett's role. He is no longer her ally, but a tool of society. Her desire to continue a nonconformist existence isolates her from both Gannett and society. Her ultimate decision to accept a life that others expect her to lead forms a reluctant return to the "carefully screened and curtained" (SB/CSS 1, 106) life she thought she had left behind. Or, as Gannett concludes: "she, poor child! must turn back to him as Latude returned to his cell . . ." (SB/CSS 1, 125). He has become her unwilling jailor, for "no one would understand her – no one would pity her – and he, who did both, was powerless to come to her aid . . ." (SB/CSS 1, 125-126). In "Souls Belated," Wharton uses narrative point of view to juxtapose the personal and the social view on the position of an adulteress and divorcee. The story addresses female adultery primarily in terms of its social significance. Even seen from Lydia's perspective, the story focuses on her social position, whereas we hear relatively little about the emotional side of the affair.

Although the situations of the female protagonists in these two stories are diametrically opposite, the emphasis in both cases is on the social dimension of the adulterous affair. The shift in perspective serves to accentuate the difference between the personal and the public perception of the adulterous affair. Although the social dimension of female adultery remained of prime importance, in her later stories Wharton began to delve deeper into the psyche of her adulterous wives and to focus on allowing the reader to witness the adulteress's emotional response to her situation.

[34] Wharton would create a very similar scene in Chapter 8 of *The Reef*.

5.2.3. "To live inside the mind chosen": Probing the female soul[35]

Wharton's discussion of point of view in *The Writing of Fiction* shows, as I argued above, that she was keenly aware of the influence of the writer's choice of narrator and focalizer on the treatment of a subject. The choice of narrative perspective, Wharton states should "precede any study of the subject chosen, since the subject is conditioned by the answer" (WF, 35). She appears to appreciate that the decision concerning the role of the narrator conditions the expression of a writer's views. This does not mean that the narrator's and the writer's views are always and necessarily the same. As I have pointed out in my introduction, it is important to recognize that a distinction between the historical author, the implied author, and the narrator can be made and that partial or complete equation of these narrative roles is only possible under certain conditions. However, I will not emphasize this aspect in my analyses.

As Susan Lanser argues, the writer can voice his/her views on morals and manners through the narrator's psychological and ideological stance. As these are perhaps the most complex aspects of point of view, they are not always easy to determine. The narrator's psychological stance "encompasses the broad question of the narrator's distance or affinity to each character and event [. . .] represented in the text" (Lanser 1981, 201-202). Lanser argues that "[i]t is virtually impossible for a narrator to tell a story without communicating either explicitly or, as is more common, implicitly through a variety of means, some degree of distance or affinity, detachment from or involvement with the various subjects (events, objects, places, and especially personae) which constitute the story world" (Lanser 1981, 202). One of the aspects that reveal the degree of affinity between a narrator and a character is "the mode of focalization or access to characters' consciousnesses" (Lanser 1981, 207). She explains:

> It is important to note that in a sense the issue here is the obverse of what I presented in my discussion of narrative levels: there I posited the focalizer as a perceiving consciousness, while here I am concerned with the focalizer as a character whose mind a narrator permits us to see. In other words, although the same character may be encountered both as a participant in narrative structure (as focalizer) and as a character whose internal consciousness is revealed to us, the question at this point is not 'who sees,' but how the character is seen. (Lanser 1981, 208)

In discussing this aspect, Susan Lanser presents an axis of vision which ranges from a wholly external vision, which "omits virtually every trace of a reflecting consciousness" (Lanser 1981, 210), to a wholly interior vision of a character, in which "all that is presented about a character comes from that character's own self-representation" (Lanser 1981, 209). The narrator's psychological stance

[35] For the citation in this title of this section see WF, 35.

forms "a vital component of the 'message' the text communicates" (Lanser 1981, 202). Although it is not always identical to the narrator's ideological stance, the two are intertwined. One of the most important components of the narrator's ideological stance is his/her relation to the "norms against which the text is conventionally read" (Lanser 1981, 218). The narrator's ideology may be expressed in varying degrees of explicitness, using more literal or more figural phrasing. The synthesis of these two aspects of stance is perhaps best measured from the narrator's judgement of a character, ranging on Lanser's axis from approval to disapproval.

An analysis of the psychological and ideological stance of the third-person narrator in Wharton's female adultery stories reveals a fairly consistent use of the adulterous wife as the single focalizing character. The reader not only sees the story world through her eyes, but is also, as it were, locked into her head and in that way obtains access to this character's consciousness. The dominant narrative discourse that is employed is psychonarration.[36] In psychonarration, the narrator presents a character's thoughts and feelings, but they are "filtered through the narrator's consciousness" (Lanser 1981, 188). The language is also predominantly the narrator's, although the character's language may infiltrate the narrator's discourse. In Wharton's stories, the form of narrative discourse has a significant effect on how you, as reader, perceive the relationship between the narrator and the female protagonist. In her earlier stories, the narrator's ideological stance is made more explicit in the overt criticism of society's moral standards, especially with regard to female adultery and divorce, and in its treatment of the adulteress. The narrator expresses considerable affinity with the female protagonist, but does not fully cede to the internal vision of the adulterous wife. This more external view of the female protagonist enables the narrator initially to adopt a critical attitude of her, which gradually changes into predominant approval and sympathy. In her later stories, psychonarration is increasingly alternated with tagged and free indirect speech, as a result of which the narrator's vision of the main character becomes highly, sometimes almost wholly internal, leaving the narrator less room for an external view of the adulteress and her situation. The narrator's ideological stance is implied in the way in which the female protagonist is depicted, rather than overtly expressed, as my analysis of four of Wharton's later female adultery stories, "Autres Temps...," "Joy in the House," "Permanent Wave," and "Atrophy," will show.

Autres Temps...

In "Autres Temps..." (1911), a story from the middle period of Wharton's career, the narrator's attitude towards the female protagonist gradually changes from mild condescension to empathy. In this story, the ostracized

[36] Lanser has adopted the term from Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 21-57.

divorcee Mrs. Lidcote returns to America to be with her recently divorced, but about to be remarried daughter Leila. She discovers that New York society may have come to accept divorce and remarriage among the younger generation, but that it is unprepared to reconsider the moral verdict that was once passed on her. The narrator uses Mrs. Lidcote as the focalizer, and we see her rediscovery of America through her eyes. Using psychonarration, the narrator compassionately reports on Mrs. Lidcote's thoughts and feelings about her past and her resulting status as an ostracized divorcee. Her adulterous relationship is described as "so disastrous an experiment" (AT/CSS 2, 258), and the unanticipated news that her daughter too has got divorced is said to have brought back "the horror and misery she had, all the long years, so patiently screened and secluded" (AT/CSS 2, 258). However, the overly dramatic language in which the narrator occasionally refers to Mrs. Lidcote and her situation also betrays the narrator's criticism of the female protagonist. The narrator refers to Mrs. Lidcote as "poor woman" and to her past as "her own poor miserable past" (AT/CSS 2, 258). This is mirrored in Mrs. Lidcote's view of her daughter, whom she regards as "a projection of her own long-past rebellion" (AT/CSS 2, 258) and to whom she refers as "poor child" (AT/CSS 2, 260) and "poor darling" (AT/CSS 2, 262). These mildly ironic qualifications are an indication that the narrator sees the female protagonist as someone who is rather preoccupied with her own social situation, perhaps even prone to self-pity.

The internal view of Mrs. Lidcote invites the reader's sympathy for her situation, but we are also made aware of her naiveté. The narrator notes her bewilderment at what she encounters. She has lived outside America for so long that she is unprepared for what awaits her upon return to New York, where social relations and the mores with regard to marriage and divorce have changed drastically. While listening to the conversation of the modern representatives of New York that she meets on board, she finds it difficult to decode their language and behaviour, and "to determine whether they were married or unmarried, 'nice' or 'horrid,' or any one or other of the definite things which young women, in her youth and her society, were conveniently assumed to be" (AT/CSS 2, 259). They simply do not fit into one of her "old-fashioned categories" (AT/CSS 2, 259). This passage of psychonarrated discourse is clearly infiltrated with Mrs. Lidcote's language, creating a picture of the 'brave new world' which she encounters in terms of naive bewilderment. The narrator, however, also uses this passage to paint a picture of New York society in much harsher and more derisive terms. The young women Mrs. Lidcote overhears on board are described as having "the latest Paris hats on their heads and the latest New York ideas in them," and belonging to "a group of idle and opulent people" (AT/CSS 2, 259). Their conversation reveals their shallowness, for it "leaped elliptically from allusion to allusion, their unfinished sentences dangled over bottomless pits of conjecture, and they gave their bewildered hearer the impression not so much of talking only of their intimates, as of being intimate with everyone alive" (AT/CSS 2, 259). New York

has become a "crowded, topsy-turvy world, with its headlong changes and helter-skelter readjustments, its new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations" (AT/CSS 2, 267) in which there is no room for "a character fashioned by slower processes and a life broken under their inexorable pressure" (AT/CSS 2, 267). Whereas the narrator's criticism of the New York of Mrs. Lidcote's youth is expressed metaphorically, as part of her dark memories of its judgemental attitude, modern America is described in outright negative terms, accentuating its callousness and superficiality.

The narrator's presentation of the heroine as confused and ill-equipped temporarily disguises the dangers of this new society. Together with Mrs. Lidcote, the reader may be taken in by the possibilities the new order offers. As she tries to fathom the implications of what she is told about the new social order, she becomes hopeful:

> And then, in a flash, she viewed the chaos from a new angle, and order seemed to move upon the void. If the old processes were changed, her case was changed with them; she too was part of the general readjustment, a tiny fragment of the new pattern worked out in bolder freer harmonies. Since her daughter had no penalty to pay, was not she herself released by the same stroke? (AT/CSS 2, 267).

However, in the course of her short stay in her home country, Mrs. Lidcote discovers that "the new dispensation" (AT/CSS 2, 278) does not exonerate her. The seemingly warm welcome she is given cannot hide the fact that New York society refuses to accept her return as a respected member. As Mrs. Lidcote begins to see through the hypocrisy of the 'brave new world,' she is no longer bewildered by the new order and naively optimistic about her position. If she was at first confused by the modern New Yorkers, she now sees through those who try to keep her from making a renewed appearance in society. The language in the final parts of the story is largely stripped of dramatic overtones and the narrator has Mrs. Lidcote analyse her situation in clear terms:

> It's simply that society is much too busy to revise its own judgments. Probably no one in the house with me stopped to consider that my case and Leila's were identical. They only remembered that I'd done something which, at the time I did it, was condemned by society. My case had been passed on and classified: I'm the woman who has been cut for nearly twenty years. The older people have half forgotten why, and the younger ones have never really known: it's simply become a tradition to cut me. (AT/CSS 2, 279)

In the course of the story, the narrator's attitude towards the heroine changes. At first, the narrator's attitude is understanding and sympathizing, but also rather condescending. In the course of the story, the narrator

emphasizes Mrs. Lidcote's ability to recognize the seemingly liberal attitude of modern New York society for what it is: short-sighted and hypocritical. The narrator's ideological stance is made explicit through the deprecatory views of New York that are expressed right from the start of the story. The female protagonist is sent on a quest for the true meaning behind the hollow phrases of the inhabitants of this 'new' society. She slowly discovers what the narrator was aware of all along: that "traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy" (AT/CSS 2, 279). The female protagonist comes to share the narrator's ideological stance, and simultaneously the narrator's psychological stance changes from mild disapproval at her naiveté to approval for her mature evaluation of her social position.

Joy in the House

In a much later story, "Joy in the House" (1932), Wharton incorporates a similar shift in the narrator's ideological and psychological stance. Its female protagonist, Christine Ansley, has ended an affair of "[f]ive months and sixteen days" (JH/CSS 2, 707) with the young, brilliant painter Jeff Lithgow to go back to her husband and child.[37] The narrator initially juxtaposes Christine's extreme gratitude for her husband's magnanimity in allowing her to come back home with the narrator's clearly less positive opinion of Devons Ansley. However, the narrator's implicit criticism of Christine's confidence in her husband's motives changes into affinity with and approval of the female protagonist, as she comes to realize that she has become the victim of his hypocrisy and ruthless egotism.

Like "Autres Temps...," "Joy in the House," opens with a woman sailing home. The narrator uses Christine as the focalizer, but the relationship between the protagonist and the narrator is more complex than in the older story. In a combination of psychonarration and free indirect speech, the narrator describes Christine's settling in on board the liner to New York.

> She sat down on the narrow berth with a sigh of mingled weariness and satisfaction. The wrench had been dreadful – the last hours really desperate; she was shaken with them still – but the very moment the steamer began to glide out into the open the obsession fell from her, the tumult and the agony seemed to grow unreal, remote, as if they had been part of a sensational film she had sat

[37] Wharton also addressed the topic of changing attitudes towards marriage and divorce in an earlier short story, "The Reckoning" (1902). In this story, Julia Westall and her second husband are presented as advocates of liberal principles on marital relations ("The new adultery was unfaithfulness to self" (CSS 1, 427)). Julia is shocked and confused, however, when Clement Westall announces that he wants to terminate their marriage because he wishes to regain his freedom and marry the much younger Una Van Sinderen. Julia realizes, to her dismay, that she treated her first husband in much the same way as she is being treated now and she goes to ask him foregiveness. Wharton's handling of this topic in "The Reckoning" suggests her lack of affinity with the modern attitude towards marriage.

> and gazed at from the stalls. The real woman, her only real self, was here in this cabin, homeward bound, was Mrs. Devons Ansley – ah, thank God, still Mrs. Devons Ansley! (JH/CSS 2, 706)

The traditional way of addressing married women, using the husband's Christian and family name, underlines the accepted views on the subordinate role of the wife in a marriage. To have Christine, through the use of psychonarration, characterize "her only real self" in those terms provides an instance of ironic juxtaposition on the part of the narrator.

As Christine recollects the events leading up to this journey, Devons Ansley is described in such bitingly ironic terms, expressing contempt and dislike for everything he stands for, that Christine's motivation for her affair with a young painter becomes understandable. The narrator moreover uses the character Devons Ansley to ridicule and thereby criticize a society that prides itself on its liberalism with regard to moral issues, without, however, fundamentally changing its attitude towards those that try to make use of this newly acquired freedom. Devons is characterised as "a militant moralist, and an amateur lecturer on the new psychology," who prides himself on being "in the advance guard, an 'ultra' as he smilingly boasted" (JH/CSS 2, 707).

> But he might lecture on "The New Morality" to the end of time, and talk as loudly as he pleased about individual liberty, and living one's life: *his* life was one of bedroom slippers and the evening paper by a clean gas fire, with his wife stitching across the hearth, and telling him that the baby's first tooth was showing. (JH/CSS 2, 709)

When Christine falls in love with Jeff Lithgow, her husband accepts the consequences and, "stiffening his lips into a benedictory smile" (JH/CSS 2, 708), consents to her going away with her lover for six months: "Any time within six months, if you want to come back, there'll be joy in the house. Joy in the house!" (JH/CSS 2, 708). His liberalism is only show, however, for he can only see his wife's affair in terms of the established moral values. He insists on referring to it as a trial marriage, "[f]or, of course, my child, unless your object is marriage – and unless you have a definite understanding – er . . . er . . . pledge – I couldn't possibly let you expose yourself" (JH/CSS 2, 708-709). Even at a time when he is forced to relinquish his hold on his wife, he continues to treat her as his property and to control her future, as the story's ending will show.

The narrator's characterisation of Devons is set off against Christine's subjective and misguided view of her husband as understanding and magnanimous. As she evaluates her affair with Jeff Lithgow, she realizes her mistake and counts her blessings.

> Many women make just such mistakes, but to few, even in communities more advanced than Stokesburg, is given the

> opportunity of wiping out the past and beginning over again. She owed that to Devons; to his really superhuman generosity. It was something she would never forget; she would devote the rest of her life to making up to him for it – to that, and to bringing up their boy to appreciate and revere his father . . . (JH/CSS 2, 708)

The ironic hyperbole suggests that the narrator does not agree with Christine, even ridicules her exultation about returning home and her adoration of her husband and his world: "Yes; it was swelling, ripening in her heart, the joy of her return to these two people who were hers, who were waiting for her, for whom, in spite of everything, she was still, sacredly and inalienably, 'my wife,' 'my mother'" (JH/CSS 2, 712). The emphasis on the possessive pronoun in this psychonarrated passage gives us two different takes on the female protagonist's situation. It expresses Christine's feelings of security that she expects to find in her conventional marriage, but it is also the narrator's implicit comment on patriarchal society that sees a woman primarily as a possession, instead of an independent being.

Shortly after she has settled down again in her "exquisitely calm and orderly" (JH/CSS 2, 717) marital home, Christine's contentment is disturbed by the news of her lover's suicide. Christine discovers that her husband is not the forgiving and understanding man that he claims to be. When she finds out that her husband has purposely kept this news from her in order not to "stir up evil sediments" (JH/CSS 2, 717), she realizes that her return has been like walking back into a trap. The final scene is a typical instance of Wharton's cynical humour, as her narrator once more draws attention to the welcoming panel "on which skillful hands had woven in tight violets and roses: JOY IN THE HOUSE" (JH/CSS 2, 714). Christine orders it to be taken down, because it is clear that there will be little joy in the Ansley house for the story's female protagonist.

Christine's discovery of the true nature of her husband's "superhuman generosity" (JH/CSS 2, 708) resembles Mrs. Lidcote's discovery that the warm welcome that she receives in New York is, in fact, only a thin layer of veneer, covering up the fact that she has not been forgiven her past mistake. As in "Autres Temps...," the narrator's criticism is aimed especially at a society which claims to have abjured its old-fashioned, rigorous principles around marriage and to be more accepting of divorce. However, this does not automatically mean that the narrator approves of the adulteress. Christine is described with a considerable degree of leniency. Her adulterous inclinations are understandable, in the light of her husband's characterization. But her dreams of starting a new life in Europe at the side of a young artist are presented as romantic illusions. She is dazzled by "the violence, the absoluteness of his [Jeff's] love" (JH/CSS 2, 710), but she discovers there is "something unstable, unreliable in his talent, just as there was in his character" (JH/CSS 2, 707), which she cannot cope with. She moreover lacks the stamina to give up her well-regulated existence and is only too eager to

return to it. Her ultimate fate, being trapped in a hypocritical marriage, "lifelong imprisonment," as R.W.B. Lewis observes (Lewis, 507), is severe, but, the narrator implies, Christine is co-responsible for her own future.

"Joy in the House," together with "Atrophy" (1927) and "Permanent Wave" (1935), belongs to Wharton's final stage of her life and career. These stories are all set in the America of the 1920s and incorporate Wharton's representation of the 'New Woman' in this post World War I era. The adulterous wives that appear in these stories are products of this new America. Their adulterous adventures are induced by romantic notions of escapism from unsuccessful, restrictive marriages, but they are as incapable of shaping their lives according to their wishes as their predecessors were. In terms of narrative technique, "Atrophy" and "Permanent Wave" differ from "Joy in the House" in that they focus more closely on what goes on in the female protagonist's head. Following the female protagonist for a time span which is limited to a few hours, the third-person narrator predominantly uses psychonarration to report the thoughts and emotions of the adulterous heroine. The infiltration of the narrator's psychonarration by the character's speech and the frequent alternation with indirect free speech result in a blending of the narrator's voice and the female protagonist's thoughts. Although the narrator's psychological stance is characterized by a strong affinity with the main character, the ideological stance of the narrator is not one of approval for the adulteress. The female protagonists of "Atrophy" and "Permanent Wave" have adapted themselves to the modern way of life, but they fall victim to the old-fashioned moral standards with regard to marriage and marital fidelity. The criticism of the narrators is not exclusively directed at society, however, but as much at the adulterous wives.

Permanent Wave

"Permanent Wave" presents one of the most extreme examples in Wharton's short story work of the type of female protagonist who feels she belongs to the modern generation, but who does not succeed in escaping from the restrictive mores of 'old' New York. We meet Mrs. Vincent Craig, as she rushes in at her hairdresser's salon; she is planning to run away with her lover the next day and the thought of facing him "with a mop of lank irregular hair" (PW/CSS 2, 789) is abhorrent to her. The narrator stresses the female protagonist's vivacity, charm, and notorious lack of punctuality; she is "late as usual" (PW/CSS 2, 789), but manages to persuade Gaston to 'do' her anyway. The reader listens to Nalda as she broods over her marriage and her affair with the young explorer Phil Ingerson, while getting a permanent wave.

> There was so much to occupy her thoughts; every word of Phil's, every glance, his smile, his laugh, his comments on her dress and

> her looks (*he* never failed to notice when she had been newly waved!), and his odd paradoxical judgments of life and men, which were never exactly what one expected, and therefore so endlessly exciting – whereas with poor Vincent you could tell before he opened his mouth what he was going to say, and say it for him more quickly than he could get it out. (PW/CSS 2, 791)

The dominant narrative discourse is psychonarration, alternated with indirect free speech. The narrator's discourse is light and chaotic, reflecting Nalda Craig's associative train of thought and her language. The characterization of this adulteress is filled with irony, accentuating her superficiality and capriciousness. Despite the light-hearted tone, the narrator's criticism of Nalda is implicit in the details that we are given about her frivolousness. Her dashing appearance is one of the most memorable things of the first meeting with her lover: "[C]ould she help it if she was prettier than the other women, and if her fur coat was out and away the smartest there, and if her hair had been 'permed' the day before, and looked as lustrous as a chestnut just out of the burr?" (PW/CSS 2, 790-791). She concludes that "being waved gave one, as nothing else did, no, not even a new hat, that sense of security and power which a woman never needed more than at her first meeting with the man who was to remake her life. . . ." (PW/CSS 2, 791). Nalda Craig's life is determined by outer appearances and fast living. It is not surprising that she finds her marriage to the contemplative, predictable professor Vincent Craig uninspiring and dull. The narrator's irony, however, clearly indicates that the reader should not take this female protagonist very seriously.

Confined to her hairdresser's chair, she is overcome by a sense of pity for her husband, "[o]ld Vincent" (PW/CSS 2, 792). She imagines how he will feel about her leaving him and seems "in a queer and unexpected way, to be feeling it with him, to be not only the cause of his suffering but a sharer in it . . ." (PW/CSS 2, 793). Nalda's thoughts soon trail off to more pleasant subjects, but the narrator has carefully prepared the reader for the story's outcome. Nalda Craig is in for a rude awakening. When her hairdresser convinces her that she has mixed up the days of the week, she realizes that as a result she has missed her chance to make her escape together with her lover. The narrator stresses the chastening effect this has on Nalda. The urgency to get out of a monotonous marriage has suddenly disappeared: "It was curious; she had no faith any longer in the reality of that other future toward which, a few hours ago, every drop of blood in her was straining" (PW/CSS 2, 797-798). This seemingly sudden change of heart has, however, been presaged by Nalda's compunction about her husband earlier on in the story. When her husband, ignorant of his wife's plans to leave him, convinces Nalda that she was not wrong about the day after all and she realizes that there would still be time to meet her lover for their runaway appointment, she decides that it is too late to grasp this opportunity and that she has to resign herself to a future with her "domestic jailer" (PW/CSS 2, 799). Her fit of

hysterical laughter, when she discovers that her plans have been thwarted due to her own silliness, is ambiguous. It can be interpreted both as a signal of relief and of anxious anticipation. Is she relieved because she does not have to give up her safe existence for the insecurity of a life with her explorer lover? Or is her response one of nervous panic at the realization that she will never get another chance to change around her life? This ambiguity invites the reader to consider his/her own interpretation of the scene. However, the story does not quite end there.

The story's final sentences have a rather unexpectedly grim ring to them. As she faints into her husband's arms, Nalda notices: "Poor old Vincent – he looks like death" (PW/CSS 2, 800). She is aware that "with painful precautions he was lowering her slowly to the sofa, pushing back her suffocating hair, composing her limbs as if, with pious hands, he were preparing her for her final rest . . ." (PW/CSS 2, 800). Like Wharton's other adulteresses, Nalda Craig is sentenced to what seems like a living death. The response of a contemporary critic to the story is remarkable for its interpretation of the ending: "'Permanent Wave' is a short, sharp piece; apparently hard, but in its dénouement surprisingly and reassuringly human."[38] In my view, however, the irony that suffuses the story has turned black and the death metaphor is hardly reassuring. It suggests that the narrator feels compassion for the female protagonist, despite earlier criticism of her shallowness and callousness. The narrator's attitude towards the female protagonist as a result remains ambiguous. Nalda Craig gets her come-uppance, but her fate also invites sympathy.

Atrophy

"Atrophy" can be seen as a companion piece to "Permanent Wave," in that it also centres on an adulterous wife who is characterized as belonging to the modern American generation. In this story, the narrator's attitude towards the female protagonist is even more ambiguous than in "Permanent Wave." Nora Frenway is described as modern in outlook and behaviour, seeming "as free as any of the young married women of her group," who are expected to go in for "[p]oker playing, smoking, cocktail drinking, dancing, painting, short skirts, bobbed hair and the rest" (A/CSS 2, 502). However, she complies with the new standards largely because that is what is expected of her and because it is easier not to stand out: "Not that she was a woman to be awed by the conventions. She knew she wasn't. She had always taken their measure, smiled at them – and conformed" (A/CSS 2, 502). She is characterized as a woman who, successfully, does her utmost not to be conspicuous. She knows that no one would suspect her of an adulterous affair: "Didn't she know what

[38] Percy Hutchinson, "Mrs. Wharton's New Stories and Other Recent Works of Fiction," *New York Times Book Review* (26 April 1936); reprinted in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, eds. James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 535.

her friends said of her? 'Nora? No more temperament than a lamp post. Always buried in her books. . . . Never very attractive to men, in spite of her looks.' Hadn't she said that of other women, who perhaps, in secret, like herself. . .?" (A/CSS 2, 503). We do not, in fact, learn very much about her relationship with Christopher Aldis, except that she has always been prostrate with the fear of discovery. Her decision to visit him on his death-bed, under the guise of a social call to her old governess, is as daring as it is desperate.

The reader joins Nora Frenway as she is on her way to her terminally ill lover, who is nursed by his sister, Miss Jane Aldis. The narrator describes Nora's journey, during which she muses on her situation, in extended passages of psychonarration, alternated with indirect free speech.

> Her life had been so carefully guarded, so inwardly conventional in a world where all the outer conventions were tottering, that no one had ever known she had a lover. No one – of that she was absolutely sure. All the circumstances of the case had made it necessary that she should conceal her real life – her only real life – from everyone about her; from her half-invalid irascible husband, his prying envious sisters, and the terrible monumental old chieftainess, her mother-in-law, before whom all the family quailed and humbugged and fibbed and fawned. (A/CSS 2, 501)

The narrator's discourse gives an undistorted reflection of the character's thoughts and emotions about herself and her situation, using language and terminology which we readily accept as Nora's own. There appears to be no distance between the narrator's and the female protagonist's perception of the situation.

> What nonsense to pretend that nowadays, even in big cities, in the world's greatest social centers, the severe old-fashioned standards had given place to tolerance, laxity and ease! You took up the morning paper, and you read of girl bandits, movie star divorces, 'hold-ups' at balls, murder and suicide and elopement, and a general welter of disjointed disconnected impulses and appetites; then you turned your eyes onto your own daily life, and found yourself cribbed and cabined, as beset by vigilant eyes, observant friends, all sorts of embodied standards, as any white muslin novel heroine of the sixties! (A/CSS 2, 501)

The narrator's sharp condemnation of the lax moral standards of modern, big city life refers to Nora's situation, but the repeated use of 'you' in this passage suggests that the narrator shares Nora's experience, in fact seems to have become immersed in the female protagonist.

There are no overt judgemental statements about Nora Frenway's adultery, but the social implications of the affair are addressed by repeated

emphasis on Nora's fear of discovery. She knows that "[t]he least self-betrayal would have been the end of everything. Too many eyes were watching her, and her husband's family was so strong, so united – when there was anybody for them to hate – and at all times so influential, that she would have been defeated at every point, and her husband would have kept the children" (A/CSS 2, 502). The narrator's depiction of Nora's in-laws as maliciously vindictive is an instance of explicit criticism of a society that issues punishments that do not fit the crime. However, this overt criticism does not automatically imply approval of the adulteress.

Nora's fear of discovery leaves her utterly defenceless in the face of the antagonism with which her lover's sister confronts her: "'How she must hate me – and I never thought of it,' mused Nora, who had imagined that she had thought of everything where her relation to her lover was concerned" (A/CSS 2, 508). She is shocked to discover that, despite the advantages that modern society has brought her, she is still at the mercy of those that represent the old social order, her husband and his family and her lover's sister: "She could not imagine why she felt so powerless and baffled. What had a woman who was young and handsome and beloved to fear from a dowdy and insignificant old maid?" (A/CSS 2, 508). To Nora's horror, the two women sit facing each other, "piling up [. . .] conversational rubbish, while upstairs, out of sight, the truth, the meaning of their two lives hung on the frail thread of one man's intermittent pulse" (A/CSS 2, 508). Her inability, even in this critical situation, to break through "her intense desire to conceal from everyone the tie between herself and Christopher" (A/CSS 2, 505) renders her helpless. Not only is she forced to leave without having seen her lover, his sister takes her final revenge, announcing that she will write to thank Nora's husband for his wife's visit, thus betraying the true nature of Nora's trip. Knowing that her husband is now likely to find out about her affair, Nora realizes that her decision to visit her lover has turned out to be a very costly mistake.

The narrator's attitude towards the female protagonist is much more ambiguous than in "Permanent Wave." "Atrophy" is certainly less obviously ironic. The introduction of the story's protagonist invites the reader's concern for her situation. We are made to share her anxiety at being caught out. Her lover's sister, whose attitude towards Nora is so icy and ungracious that we can only feel sympathy for the female protagonist, personifies society's lack of understanding for Nora's situation. But we witness how Nora gets entangled in her own mesh of evasions and lies, which leads to her apprehensive flight from the scene.

These later stories show a significant change in the ideological stance of Wharton's narrators with regard to the adulteress. Whereas in the earlier stories, the adulterous wives are depicted as victims of their circumstances and of the society in which they live, the later stories reveal the narrators' ambivalence towards these women. They are more critical of their female protagonists, accentuating the less than positive role that these women have in

determining their own fates. This change appears to reflect Wharton's feelings of unease about the changes in a society that she had left behind years before and to which she was not a first-hand witness. Griffin Wolff says that in Wharton's later work "one senses an attitude of resentment [. . .] – manifest in a tone of righteousness and a too-prompt condemnation of the modern world" (Griffin Wolff, 374). Wharton was a rigorous critic of 'old' New York, but also respected its determination to hold on to its traditional moral values. She deplored the decay of American society with the advent of the 'Jazz Age' and felt that "something crucially valuable had been lost" (Lewis, 424).[39] She continued to address the subject of women's position in marriage and to employ the female adultery motif, but whereas her earlier work reveals a clear sympathy for women who feel entrapped and who seek for emotional and spiritual fulfilment in a relationship outside marriage, Wharton expresses a far more ambivalent view in her later work.

Wharton's transgressive female protagonists are up against a society that, in spite of its modernity, has not fundamentally changed its attitude towards women. Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton "saw in modern patriarchal social customs and taboos their deep prehistoric roots, and hence their tenacity" (Ammons 1980, 159). Society had changed considerably in the 1920s, but had continued to restrict women's freedom to develop into emotionally mature and independent human beings. The infantilization of American women, which Wharton deprecated in *French Ways and Their Meaning*,[40] moved to a next level with the invention of the flapper, "the quintessential child-woman" (Ammons 1980, 160), who was considered to be independent and liberated, but who was in fact "just another human doll" (Ammons 1980, 187). The female protagonists of Wharton's later female adultery stories are not flappers, but they do have some of the traits that were associated with this type of young woman. The most obvious example of this "blend of artificiality and immaturity" (Ammons 1980, 160) is no doubt Nalda Craig in "Permanent Wave." Her daring and independence are only skin-deep, and in spite of her meticulous preparations, we suspect that she never really intended to run off with her explorer. Christine Ansley, in "Joy in the House," appears very audacious when she leaves her husband and child for her young lover, but it is her husband who determines the conditions of her romantic adventure. The female protagonist of "Atrophy," the least ironic of Wharton's later female adultery stories, is most acutely aware of the discrepancy between her outward appearance of an independent and modern young woman and her fear to break loose from social conventions. The female protagonists in these

[39] Hermione Lee points out that 'jazz' was a term of abuse for Wharton: "The word epitomised for her the unpleasantness of modernity: trends, instant gratification, 'pseudo-culture,' slang, noise, impermanence, fast living and standardisation" (Lee, 607).

[40] In her book *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton expresses an admiration for French society and culture that borders on idolatry. In the chapter "The New Frenchwoman," she expresses her special appreciation of the role French women are allowed to play in society. "[T]he Frenchwoman is *grown up*," Wharton argues, whereas in comparison "the average American woman is still in the kindergarten" Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919; Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press, 1997) 100-101. Wharton's italics.

later stories are faced with the same fate as the adulteresses of Wharton's earlier stories. They are as much hemmed in by the restrictive patriarchal culture as their predecessors. However, they are assessed much more critically. I would argue that it is not Wharton's attitude towards female adultery that has changed, but her appreciation of the American women on whom she modelled her characters. The 'New Woman,' and more specifically the 'New American Woman,' has herself become an object of Wharton's criticism.

5.2.4. "The touch of inevitableness": Beginnings and endings[41]

Edith Wharton did not only have specific ideas about the use of point-of-view techniques, she was also very outspoken about the construction of her works of fiction, and more specifically about their beginnings and endings. In *A Backward Glance*, she states: "My last page is always latent in my first" (BG, 208). This remark reveals her sense of a work of fiction as a structured whole, in which its opening already foreshadows its closure. With regard to the short story, she argues, "the writer's first care should be to know how to make a beginning" (WF, 39), because the brevity of the form does not permit the writer to draw in the reader at a leisurely pace. Writers should aim for "what musicians call the 'attack'" (WF, 39), for if the writer's "first stroke be vivid and telling the reader's attention will be instantly won" (WF, 39-40). The opening of a short story should not only immediately arouse the reader's interest, it should also "contain the germ of the whole" (WF, 39).[42] In order to write a successful opening, the writer should therefore be fully conscious of what the story as a whole is to convey.

The conclusion of a story should, in Wharton's views, be embedded in its opening, or, as she terms it, be "*ab ovo*" (WF, 39). She nonetheless recognizes the difficulty of writing a satisfactory ending, of providing "the touch of inevitableness to the conclusion" (WF, 38). Wharton has, Barbara White points out, been criticized for "[h]er reliance on coincidence" (White, 13) in order to bring her stories to a successful ending. Although Wharton occasionally used the surprise ending, which John Gerlach defines as based on the "notion of concealing from the reader until the end a fact that would have entirely changed the story" (Gerlach, 54), the concept of a surprise ending does not accord with Wharton's principles with regard to story closure. However, as Gerlach points out, Wharton's short story "Roman Fever" (1934) is an example of a story with a very effective surprise ending (Gerlach, 58-60). The story

[41] For the citation in the title of this section see WF, 38.

[42] I cannot resist citing the opening of a Wharton story on the adultery of a husband, which is very successful in 'attacking' its readers and is an example of Wharton's sometimes very dark sense of humour: "His wife had said: 'If you don't give her up I'll throw myself from the roof.' He had not given her up, and his wife had thrown herself from the roof." The story is, very aptly, called "The Day of the Funeral" (CSS 2, 669-686).

deals with the pre-marital infidelity of Grace Ansley with the fiancé of her friend, Alida Slade. Mrs. Ansley's final comment – "I had Barbara" (CSS 2, 843) – constitutes a very satisfactory surprise ending. It explains the precipitate marriage of Grace to Horace Ansley and provides an answer to the question, raised by Mrs. Slade, on how the rather dull Mrs. Ansley and her equally dull husband came to have such a lively daughter. Barbara Ansley is the result of a secret *rendez-vous* of her mother with Delphin Slade. This revelation also forces Mrs. Slade to recognize that she has never really known her old friend and that her feelings of superiority with regard to her are not justified.

Wharton's female adultery stories can be characterized as epiphanic and antithetical. The story's protagonist often has an epiphanic moment at the end of the story, when s/he comes to comprehend reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization. The stories can be seen as antithetical in that the protagonist's situation at the end of the story is diametrically opposite to the desired or expected situation as depicted at the beginning of the story. Wharton's stories generally build up to the ultimate destruction of an initial illusion or ambition and often lead to the adulteress's awareness that she is not, nor ever will be, able to break free from the restrictive social and moral codes that condition her life. In "Autres Temps...," Mrs. Lidcote's initial expectations of being allowed to re-enter the society that had ostracized her many years ago are shattered when she discovers that social mores with regard to adulterous divorcees have not changed at all. Similarly, when Christine Ansley returns to her marital home after the failure of her affair with Jeff Lithgow, she feels that the warm welcome that she receives is a sign of her husband's liberalism and magnanimity, only to find that he has callously hidden from her the death of her former lover in order to keep her content. Mrs. Ransom, in "The Pretext," sincerely believes that her young friend Guy Dawnish has amorous feelings for her, until it is made painfully clear to her that his gallantry only served to distract the attention from his real affair with a woman of his own age.

Wharton's stories provide good examples of what Thomas Leitch calls a "debunking rhythm" (Leitch, 132), which entails that the character's false knowledge or assumptions about the world are removed, without being replaced by anything true or reliable. Leitch draws a parallel with the effect aimed at in stories of initiation, or coming of age: "[T]he heroes, who begin with high ideals and false assumptions about themselves, lose their ideals and illusions without gaining any compensating revelation or indeed anything more than experience of the world as it is" (Leitch, 134). Leitch argues that in this type of story, the reader is made to undergo an analogous experience. I would add, however, that the reader's experience does not run parallel to the character's. The reader's assumptions of a stable patriarchal society are challenged by the introduction of a transgressive wife as the principal character. The protagonist's disillusionment may create the impression of a reinstalment of the social order, but this is only a temporary reassurance. Wharton does not overtly challenge social relations by allowing the

adulteresses to break free from their restrictive marriages; the *status quo* is seemingly reinstalled. However, the effect of the use of the female protagonist as focalizer is that the reader is made emphatically aware of the damage that has been done to the confidence of the adulteress in her role of wife and mother and to her faith in social relations. Nothing is done to reinstate the reader's confidence in the stability of patriarchal society. Wharton's stories are highly effective in the way they debunk the fallacy of the happy and content wife.

5.2.5. "Grasped and coloured by their medium": Edith Wharton's use of imagery[43]

Kate Chopin's use of religious imagery in relation to female sexuality in her stories about adulterous women can be regarded, as I argued in chapter 4, as daring and potentially blasphemous. The imagery which Edith Wharton very consistently used in her female adultery stories, and indeed in all of her fiction, is less obviously controversial. Two of her lifelong passions, architecture and interior decoration, on the one hand, and travelling, on the other, formed important sources of inspiration. Both interests can be said to affirm Wharton's image as a product of the privileged layers of society and a socialite. Her non-fiction books on architecture and interior decoration focus on the kind of houses that members of her own class would live in, and her travel books introduce her contemporary readers to a world which most of them would be unlikely to visit themselves. However, the manner in which she employed imagery inspired by these 'elitist' interests contributed significantly to the expression of her criticism of the manners and morals of the society of which she formed part. Wharton's imagery enhances the depiction of the adulterous persuasion as part of her discussion of the position of women in contemporary society. Imagery related to architecture and interior decoration is used to underline her depiction of a society which is essentially restrictive, both physically and emotionally. Travel, by way of contrast, is used as a metaphor for the escape from these constraints. The two types of imagery can therefore be regarded as complementary.

An 'emotional architecture'

Wharton's fictional work abounds with often detailed and lavish descriptions of houses and their interiors. She made use of her wide knowledge of architecture

[43] For the citation in the title of this section see WF, 21. In the introductory chapter of *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton argues the significance of the manner in which "the great, the central, matter of subject" (WF, 21) is presented, "not only in the narrower sense of language, but also, and rather, as they are grasped and coloured by their medium, the narrator's mind, and given back in words" (WF, 21).

and of interior decoration to create fictional spaces which provide an 'emotional architecture' for her characters, in that they either reflect or contrast with the social position and/or emotional and psychological disposition of her characters.[44] Vanessa Chase points out that Wharton's books on architecture and interior design and her own homes "are prescriptions for how she envisioned architecture *ought* to be, while her novels are critical descriptions of how architecture and society *are*" (Chase, 132; Chase's italics). The domestic spaces in her fiction do not usually reproduce the ideal model in her work on architecture and interior design, but implicitly comment on houses as the restrictive physical and spiritual environments of American women. I will argue that Wharton frequently employed imagery relating to houses and their decoration to underline physical, mental, or social characteristics of her characters and to elucidate their personalities. In her female adultery stories, this type of imagery is used especially, though not exclusively, in relation to the female protagonist, the adulterous wife. Wharton effectively uses the marital home as a symbol of the repressive society that victimizes women who attempt to break away from the restrictions imposed upon them. The punishment for the adulteress's transgressive behaviour is not physical, but psychological imprisonment. The hostility towards the female adulteress is visualized by comparing characteristics or representatives of society to inhospitable houses and interiors. Inanimate objects are personified and appear to share the moral standards against which society measures the transgressive wife.

In "The Pretext" (1908), Mrs. Ransom's uneventful life in the narrow-minded community of a New England university town is depicted with the aid of repeated references to cramped living-quarters. She is described as passing through the "narrow hall, and thence up the narrow stairs to her bedroom," where she sits down in front of "the cramped eagle-topped mirror above her plain prim dressing table" (P/CSS 1, 632). Her drawing room is "pale" and "little," and she has come to fit the scene. Mrs. Ransom is described as wan and inconsequential: "her fair hair had grown too thin" and "her mouth was thin, too, and a little strained; her lips were too pale; and there were lines in the corners of her eyes. It was a face which had grown middle-aged while it waited for the joys of youth" (P/CSS 1, 632). In fact, as the narrator aptly concludes: "She was as flat as the pattern of the wallpaper – and so was her life" (P/CSS 1, 633).

Her married life has left her totally unprepared, but nevertheless secretly wishing for the romantic love that has never come her way and has made her look and feel old before her time. The living arrangements of the Ransoms reflect the inescapable closeness of their marriage. Her husband is able to get to his dressing-room through a door from the passage,

[44] I would like to thank Alison Findlay for suggesting this term, in response to my paper "'A woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms': Edith Wharton's personal and fictional representation of homes," presented at the conference *Gender in Cultural Practice II*, Lancaster (UK), 16-18 November 2006. This paper will be published in a forthcoming edition of *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design, and Domestic Space* (July 2009).

> but it was characteristic of the relentless domesticity of their relation that he chose, as a matter of course, the directer way through his wife's bedroom. She had never before been disturbed by this practice, which she accepted as inevitable, but had merely adapted her own habits to it, delaying her hasty toilet till he was safely in his room, or completing it before she heard his step on the stair; since a scrupulous traditional prudery had miraculously survived this massacre of all the privacies. (P/CSS 1, 634)

Mrs. Ransom appears never to have become totally familiar with her husband's close physical presence. Her modesty implies a shocking lack of physical intimacy between the couple.

As in "The Pretext," the life of the female protagonist of "Joy in the House" is depicted with frequent references to the marital home. Whereas in the former story, the narrowness and darkness of Mrs. Ransom's surroundings are stressed, in the latter the emphasis is on tidiness and cleanliness. Christine Ansley longs for the neatness and cleanliness with which her married life is associated after her extramarital affair with the painter Jeff Lithgow, which created "a welter of untidiness and confusion" (JH/CSS 2, 706-707). When she has ended their relationship in an atmosphere of turmoil, she is relieved to find herself on board the liner to New York, where she immediately resumes her old, orderly life. She unpacks "attentively and systematically" (JH/CSS 2, 706) in order to be "comfortably settled" (JH/CSS 2, 706), "shipshape" (JH/CSS 2, 706), the affair with Jeff "wiped out of existence" (JH/CSS 2, 707). The repeated use of the verb 'wipe out' in relation to the affair signifies her desire to make a fresh start and to obliterate a past which she considers sordid and dirty. [45]

The Ansley house is described as being in "the very best neighborhood, high up, dry, airy, healthy" (JH/CSS 2, 712) and Devons' study is "as tidy and glossy as a model dairy" (JH/CSS 2, 712-713). Upon her arrival, "the house smiled at them from all its glittering windows" (JH/CSS 2, 714) and her mother-in-law awaits her "on the shiny doorstep" (JH/CSS 2, 714) and enfolds her "in an embrace that breathed of hygiene and Christian charity" (JH/CSS 2, 714). Devons Ansley fits his surroundings, for "[h]e smelt of eau de Cologne and bath salts; something sanitary, crisp and blameless exhaled itself from his whole person. If anything could ever corrupt him, it would not be moth and rust" (JH/CSS 2, 713). At first, Christine looks forward to the orderliness and cleanliness that await her, but soon doubt sets in: "Did the rooms look a trifle too tidy, had their personality been tidied away with the rest?" (JH/CSS 2, 717). Christine discovers that the crispness of her marital home represents only an outward layer of respectability. It is indeed not "moth and rust" which have corrupted Devons, but the unbridled desire to regain his respectability as

[45] Later on in the story, Christine is said to have been given "the opportunity of wiping out the past" (JH/CSS 2, 708) and her husband Devons is heard to echoe this with: "The parenthesis closed – everything between wiped out, obliterated, forgotten" (JH/CSS 2, 715).

a patriarchal figure by re-incorporating his wife into the conventional mores of social respectability.

In both short stories, the imagery of the house is used to support the depiction of a normative society that restricts women's emotions. The frequent use of imagery related to houses and decoration is particularly apt in the depiction of the society in which these stories are set, because for Wharton "[t]he structure and decoration of houses provide[d] important clues to social organization."[46] Cramped and dark, excessively clean, or unimaginatively decorated houses are symbolic of marital relations that favour the prerogative position of the husband and of a restrictive society in which Wharton's adulterous women lack spiritual fulfilment and emotional freedom.

Wharton does not only use this type of imagery in relation to her female characters. In "The Line of Least Resistance" (1900), imagery related to houses and their interiors is associated with the male protagonist. In this sharply ironic story, the summer residence of the Mindons reflects the marriage of its owners, who belong to *nouveau riches*, a social class about which Wharton, like many members of her social class, had her reservations. The story's protagonist, Mr. Mindon, inhabits a house which has been furnished and decorated entirely to his wife's taste. To him, it is alien, indeed almost hostile territory. He is its formal owner, yet he is no more in charge of his house than he is of his marriage. The house is the domain of his wife Millicent and her room is the centre of her "complex social system" (LLR/CSS 1, 219), which he enters "with the awe of the modest investor treading the inner precincts of finance" (LLR/CSS 1, 219). When he happens to find a letter there, which proves that she is having an extramarital affair, the room becomes the personification of his unfaithful wife:

> He sat up and glanced about him. The room looked back at him, coldly, unfamiliarly, as he had seen Millicent look when he asked her to be reasonable. And who are you? the walls seemed to say. Who am I? Mr. Mindon heard himself retorting. I'll tell you, by God! I'm the man that paid for you: silk hangings, china rubbish, glasses, chandeliers – every Frenchified rag of you. Why, if it weren't for me and my money you'd be nothing but a brick-and-plaster shell, naked as the day you were built – no better than a garret or a coal hole. Why, you wouldn't *be* at all if I chose to tear you down. I could tear the whole house down, if I chose. (LRR/CSS 1, 219-220)

Unable to confront his wife in person, he confronts her inanimate representation. He feels "a sudden increase in stature" (LRR/CSS 1, 220), as he struts across the room.

[46] Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 65.

> Why, of course, the room belonged to him, the house belonged to him, and he belonged to himself! That was the best of it! For years he had been the man that Millicent thought him, the mere projection of her disdain; and now he was himself. (LRR/CSS 1, 220)

Even in the inanimate form of a photograph, however, Millicent is capable of controlling him, as she looks at him from the frame "with the little grieved smile that seemed always to anticipate and pardon his obtuseness" (LRR/CSS 1, 220). Mr. Mindon's response to the situation is resolute: he leaves his home and aims to start divorce proceedings.

He moves into a dreary local hotel, which stands in marked contrast with the opulence of his house. The room is suffused with the smell of cheap soap and "[t]he window had been so long shut that it opened with a jerk, sending a shower of dead flies to the carpet" (LRR/CSS 1, 221). The decoration has no naked marble goddesses and over-priced nymphs, but "a print of the 'Landing of Columbus'" and "a fly-blown portrait of General Grant" (LRR/CSS 1, 221), symbols, although slightly the worse for wear, of masculine prowess and determination. Mr. Mindon, however, is not up to the kind of bravery displayed by these historical role models. When confronted with a jury of his peers, he is easily convinced to give up his plans to divorce his wife and to return home. Mr. Mindon's wealth may have bought him the outward signs of social power, but the affluent surroundings of his married life only serve to hide the absence of a real relationship and to cover up the marital infidelities of his wife. As we have also seen in "The Long Run," which I discussed in section 5.2.1., in Wharton's stories, men can become entangled in the web of social expectations as easily and inescapably as women.

Travel as escape

Wharton's frequent use of imagery related to houses and their interiors should be seen in combination with the imagery which is related to another of Wharton's passions: travel. Wharton's travel imagery is much less prominent in her female adultery stories than the imagery related to houses and interiors, but it has an interesting complementary function. Travelling and means of transportation are used metaphorically in relation to the female adulteress's longing for freedom from the confines of the patriarchal society, which dictate the course of her life, and from the marital home, which, in turn, is metaphorically depicted as inhospitable, cramped, and cluttered. In the female adultery stories, travel and various other means of transportation are strongly associated with the adulteress's freedom and escape, both literally and figuratively. The transgressive wife has dreams of running off with her lover to start a new future, but these flights from unfulfilling marriages are nearly always obstructed, either by external forces, or by the adulteress's own

misgivings. Ultimately, she finds herself more firmly entrenched in a life that she had wanted to leave behind.

In "The Long Run," Paulina Trant confesses to her lover that their meeting was "like having been shut up for months in the hold of a ship, and coming suddenly on deck on a day that was all flying blue and silver . . ." (LR/CSS 2, 310). When she leaves her marital home and turns up at her lover's doorstep, she hopes for "the chance of a berth on a ship that was off for the Happy Isles" (LR/CSS 2, 319). She is prepared to risk everything, but she finds that her lover is not as brave as she is, and she is forced to return to a life of conformation. In "Permanent Wave," Nalda Craig is planning to run off with an explorer. Bound for "end-of-the-world places" (PW/CSS 2, 790), she knows that she will be in for extreme circumstances. With considerable irony, the narrator points out that she is mainly worried about the lack of opportunities to get her hair done: "Ah, how she'd always envied women with a natural wave! No difficulty for *them* in eloping with explorers" (PW/CSS 2, 790). The "[f]our hours of immobility" at her hairdresser's forebode her actual future with her uneventful husband.[47]

In "Souls Belated," Lydia's New York life is referred to as stagnant, offering precious little scope for freely moving about: "lumbering about in her mother-in-law's landau had come to seem the only possible means of locomotion" (SB/CSS 1, 111). In contrast, her life with her lover Gannett has been characterized by continuous travel. Their drifting through Europe is, however, beginning to wear them down and they have come to realize that "[t]heir wanderings during the year had indeed been like the flight of outlaws" (SB/CSS 1, 111). We first meet the lovers as they are travelling to yet another temporary destination. Their train compartment has become a new prison to them, in which they are "sorry to be alone" (SB/CSS 1, 104), since it forces them to confront their future together, about which they have very different thoughts. The Anglo-American hotel at which they stop off, with "its vivid suggestion of social order" (SB/CSS 1, 111), forces them to reintegrate into the society that they have tried to escape. Whereas Gannet accepts his new surroundings with a sense of renewed curiosity, Lydia is determined not to let it enwrap her. In the final part of "Souls Belated," Lydia is seen to plan yet another escape, this time from her lover and a future that has been mapped out for her and which will force her back into the straightjacket of the society that she and Gannett tried to get away from. Here again, the story focuses on

[47] The story was originally published as "Poor Old Vincent" in the *Red Book Magazine* (April 1935). When it was republished in the collection *The World Over*, Wharton decided to change the title into "Permanent Wave." Wharton's decision suggests that she initially accepted, perhaps at the instigation of the editor of *Red Book Magazine*, that the title "Poor Old Vincent" was more appropriate for a popular magazine, for it emphasizes the transgressive nature of Nalda's actions and the victimization of her husband, and as such expresses agreement with the accepted moral values. When the story was republished in a collection of short stories, however, Wharton opted for a title which underlines the metaphorical significance of the beauty treatment. She apparently expected her book to attract more experienced and progressive readers, who would appreciate her use of imagery. For Wharton's experiences with *Red Book Magazine*, see Levine, 61-64.

means of transportation. Gannett watches Lydia from his hotel window as she waits for the ferry boat to take her across the lake and on to an unknown destination. She is seen to hesitate and deliberate her actions, but she retraces her steps to the hotel and the ferry boat leaves without her. In the final line of the story we are told that Gannett "began looking out the trains to Paris" (SB/CSS 1, 126). This time, the train is not a means to escape, but a vehicle that will deliver her at the doorstep of a future that she wants to, but cannot escape.

As with the imagery drawn from architecture and interior decoration, Wharton's travel imagery reflects her personal life and the development of her authorship, in which her travel books play a significant role. Mary Schriber argues that "Wharton seems to be a textbook case of writing as a process of self-discovery, and her travel essays make up a chapter of the text" (Schriber, 260). For Wharton, as for her female protagonists, travel meant an escape from her life in America. Schriber suggests that "a number of journeys and a melange of esthetic, cultural, and geographical exploits became an act of self-discovery in which Wharton identified the intensity of her engagement with Europe" (Schriber, 260). In fact, "Europe becomes a means by which to assess America, to set it in relief, to identify its deficiencies, to resurrect Wharton's feelings toward her homeland. Europe intensifies the negative impact of America" (Schriber, 266). Thus travel became a metaphor for escape from the kind of restrictive life, socially and spiritually, which Wharton mainly associated with America.

5.3. Conclusion

Wharton's interest in the technique of her *métier* stimulated her to reflect upon it critically in *The Writing of Fiction.* She found the composition of the book a difficult and laborious process. Her determination to finish it indicates that she believed that she had something worthwhile to say about fiction writing. The book was not as commercially successful as Wharton had expected, but its writing nevertheless had "lasting and critically beneficial effects" (Wegener 1995, 76), because it appears to have strengthened her confidence in her abilities as a literary critic and to have induced her to write several other essays in this genre during the final decades of her life. Although Wharton's contribution to literary criticism has perhaps not been very influential, it provides valuable insights into the way Wharton approached the writing of her own fiction.

Wharton recognized the importance of narrative point of view. In her female adultery stories she employs a variety of techniques which are aimed at allowing readers to understand or identify with the protagonists of these stories and thus to view the adulterous affair from their perspective. She occasionally opts for first-person male narrators, who render highly subjective

accounts of the affair, emphasizing the isolated position of the adulteress in a society that lives by an elaborate set of written and unwritten laws and conventions. These first-person narrators are revealed as biased and their perspective as flawed, which implicitly suggests that the view of patriarchal society on women is equally flawed. When Wharton uses a third-person narrator, which is her more usual choice, the story's protagonist tends to be employed as the focalizer. Although in *The Writing of Fiction* she argues that a shift in perspective may endanger "the unity of impression" (WF, 64) and that this should therefore be avoided, she occasionally does introduce such a shift to allow the reader to see the affair from a different angle, thereby juxtaposing the personal and the private perspective on the adulterous affair. In her later stories, Wharton tends to move in closer on the female protagonist, introducing third-person narrators who give a highly internal view of the adulteress. Nowhere, however, do Wharton's narrators become totally immersed in the characters; they always remain distinctly present as critical observers. The adulterous wives of Wharton's later stories simultaneously invite the reader's empathy for the way in which they are seen to be trapped in the confines of society and his/her critical evaluation of their behaviour, lack of maturity and/or naiveté. Thus, Wharton's critique of patriarchal society is increasingly not only directed at its male representatives, but also at those female members who, for Wharton, symbolized society in the age of modernity.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton devotes considerable attention to "the great, the central, matter of subject" (WF, 21). A subject must be tested thoroughly, before the writer decides to choose to explore it in a novel or short story. "Any subject considered in itself must first of all respond in some way to that mysterious need of a judgement on life" (WF, 23), Wharton argues: "a good subject [. . .] must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience" (WF, 24). She considers it impossible "to set up a water-tight compartment between 'art' and 'morality'" (WF, 23) and contends that fiction must provide "some sort of rational response to the reader's unconscious but insistent inner question: 'What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?'" (WF, 23). For Wharton, "[d]rama, situation, is made out of the conflicts thus produced between social order and individual appetites, and the art of rendering life in fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need to be anything, but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence" (WF, 14). Wharton deliberately uses the female adultery motif in her exploration of the conflict between women's personal expectations and the demands made by society. Without being overtly subversive by expressing agreement with the transgressive behaviour of her adulteresses, Wharton invites her readers to form their own opinions about the circumstances, and more in particular the marital and social relations, which incite her female protagonists to transgressive behaviour. In employing this literary motif, she not only depicts society's conventions with regard to marriage, divorce, and the attitude

towards extramarital relationships, she also draws psychological portraits of women (and men) who are forced to choose between playing their social role and fulfilling their dreams and desires.

Chapter 6

Unpacked treasures
Female adultery and Edith Wharton's narrative strategies of indirectness[1]

Like many of her contemporary colleagues, Edith Wharton could not avoid a degree of self-censorship in writing about taboo subjects. In addition to the narrative techniques which I discussed in the previous chapter, Wharton applied narrative strategies of indirectness in her treatment of female adultery. By narrative strategies of indirectness I mean the measures which Wharton took to enable her to write about female adultery and negotiate her views on the role of women in society and marriage, without being explicitly subversive and running the risk of censorship on account of its uninhibited treatment. In this chapter, I will argue that Wharton employed a number of narrative and rhetorical devices in her female adultery stories which I collectively refer to as her 'tact of omission,' a phrase which she introduced in *The Decoration of Houses*,[2] and which revolves around the idea of silence, in the sense of a reluctance or refusal to discuss or even mention certain topics.

Although Wharton respected the parameters set by the literary market, she privately produced texts which were not meant for immediate publication and in which she could therefore totally disregard the restrictive rules that determined her published work. I regard the journal which she kept at the time of her own adulterous affair and the so-called "Beatrice Palmato fragment" as part of Wharton's narrative strategies of indirectness, because they had a posthumous impact on her image as a woman and as an author. In these texts, she openly addressed transgressive sexuality and her own adulterous relationship, thereby breaking the textual silence which characterised her published fictional work. These writings have obliged critics to adjust their views of Wharton, both as a person and as an author, after they were discovered following her death.[3] I want to argue that these writings form a

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[1] The phrase "unpacked treasures" refers to a remark which Wharton made in one of her letters to Morton Fullerton. She writes that, unlike him, she has hoarded her emotional life and refers to it as "the treasures I long to unpack for you" (LEW, 135).

[2] "There is a sense in which works of art may be said to endure by virtue of what is left out of them, and it is this 'tact of omission' that characterizes the master hand" (DH, 198).

[3] The poem "Terminus" could also be counted among these documents. The poem was written after Wharton spent a passionate night with Morton Fullerton in suite nr. 92 of the Charing Cross

significant addition to her short stories on female adultery, because they disclose that she had more to say about female adultery than she could express in her 'official' fiction.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss how Wharton circumvented the depiction of the adulterous affair itself by concentrating on issues surrounding the affair, primarily in its aftermath, rather than on the affair itself. She furthermore employed a variety of rhetorical devices to underline the secrecy surrounding the affair. Narrators and characters use evasive and euphemistic language in talking about female adultery, which both reflects and exhibits an implicit comment on society's refusal to talk about it and to acknowledge its occurrence and its motive. This is supported by the emphatic use of the word silence. By using ellipsis, Wharton makes this silence 'visible' in the text, thereby drawing attention to a textual gap and inviting the reader's mental initiative to fill it. While evading the overt treatment of a taboo subject like female adultery, it draws the reader's attention to it and accentuates its significance.

In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss the "Beatrice Palmato fragment," a text which describes, in graphic detail, a sexual encounter of what are generally understood to be a father and his married daughter.[4] My reading of the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" will, rather than focus on the incestuous nature of the relationship which is depicted, emphasize the fact that it involves the adultery of the female protagonist and that the text can be read as a short story which celebrates the sexual gratification of women in a transgressive relationship.

In the third section, I will discuss the journal which Wharton kept at the time of her adulterous affair with Morton Fullerton. Entitled "The Life Apart. (*L'âme close*)," but more commonly known as the "Love Diary," it is a personal document, which at the same time reveals an awareness that it might at some point be read.[5] I will argue that Wharton composed this journal as a literary text, employing many of the narrative techniques that she also used in her female adultery stories. I will offer a reading of the journal as a text in which she fictionalized her adulterous affair, thereby inevitably drawing parallels between herself and the female protagonists of her short stories.

Hotel in London. There is a copy of the poem, handwritten by Morton Fullerton, among Wharton's papers which are in the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

[4] The "Beatrice Palmato fragment" is a fragment of text which was discovered by Cynthia Griffin Wolff among Wharton's papers in the Beinecke Library (Griffin Wolff, 299-308). It was first published in Lewis's biography of Edith Wharton (Lewis, 543-548) and has since been reprinted in several other publications. My citations have been taken from Lewis's biography; they are indicated with BP, followed by the page number from this edition.

[5] The journal, entitled by Wharton "The Life Apart. (*L'âme close*)," was found among Wharton's papers and is now in the Lilly Library, Indiana University. It was published, with an introduction and notes by Kenneth M. Price and Phyllis McBride, in *American Literature* 66.4 (December 1994): 663-688, as part of the article "'The Life Apart': Text and Contexts of Edith Wharton's Love Diary." When I quote from Wharton's journal, I will refer to this publication, indicated by LA, followed by the page number. Price and McBride give the complete text of Wharton's journal, including the words and fragments which she crossed out. I have chosen to omit these corrections in my citations, since they have little or no significance for my reading of the journal.

The measures which she took to ensure the survival of both the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" and the "Love Diary" suggest that she wanted to disclose for future audiences an alternative side of herself and of her authorship. It seems as if she wanted to show that she was not a cold and aloof aristocratic lady, who rationalized all her emotions, and that, at the same time, she wanted to provide examples of the full breadth of her writerly capabilities, unrestrained by the censuring laws of the American literary establishment.

6.1. "The shade of those our days that had no tongue": Edith Wharton's 'tact of omission'[6]

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton advises simplicity and moderation in interior decoration in order to achieve "supreme excellence" and give "permanence to the work of the great architects" (DH, 198). She refers to this faculty as the 'tact of omission.' With reference to her writing, I interpret the phrase as a preference for the use of various forms of textual silence. As Elsa Nettels observes: "For Edith Wharton, the crippling vice of old New York society was the code which forbade talk of the unpleasant and the scandalous and elevated equivocation to a moral duty."[7] This is closely linked to what I, in my introduction, termed dismissive censorship. The accepted social custom not to discuss certain issues could lead to the refusal to acknowledge that writers attempted to address them. By making this 'tact of omission' part of her literary strategy, Wharton turned the "oppressive codes of silence" (Levine, 189) to her advantage. I will argue that Wharton, by avoiding the depiction of the adulterous affair itself, arouses the reader's awareness of it as something which could not be spoken about publicly. Wharton enhanced this approach by having her narrators and characters use evasive and euphemistic language in talking about female adultery, by the emphatic use of the word silence, and by using ellipsis, thus making silence visible in the written text.

Rather than depicting the intimate details of an adulterous affair, Wharton generally concentrates on issues related to the adulterous affair, often in its aftermath. Thus, "Souls Belated" pictures a couple struggling to find a *modus vivendi* together after the adulterous wife has left her husband. "The Long Run" shows the affair's consequences for an adulterous couple that did not dare to break away from their old lives. The affair of the Duchess Violante in "The Duchess at Prayer" plays a central role in the plot, but it takes place off stage, unseen and unsurmised by the narrator's main source of information. We do not find out what kind of relationship Nora Frenway, in "Atrophy," had with "her own Christopher" (A/CSS 2, 504); the story instead focuses on the awkward meeting with her lover's sister. In "Joy in the House," we get a

[6] The citation in the first part of the title of this section is the subtitle of Wharton's story "The Long Run."

[7] Elsa Nettels, *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather* (Basingstoke, [etc.]: MacMillan Press, 1997) 89.

glimpse of Christine's relationship with Jeff Lithgow in flashbacks, but the story itself deals with her return to her husband and child. In "Roman Fever," Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade talk about the pre-marital adultery of the former with the latter's fiancé, which took place some twenty years before. It is only in "The Choice" that we meet an adulterous wife and her lover in the midst of their secretive affair, which ends so dramatically.

By not focusing on the adulterous affair itself, Wharton could evade spicy issues, such as the lovers' secret trysts or their sexual relationship. In none of Wharton's female adultery stories is there an explicit reference to sexual contact between the adulteress and her lover; in fact it is hardly even implied. Although Wharton chose not to emphasize the sexuality of her female protagonists in her female adultery stories, she did not shy away from the topic of sexuality altogether in her work. It has left distinct traces in her fiction, for example in her novel *Summer*, and of course in the "Beatrice Palmato fragment," which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. Wharton was more reserved in her use of or references to sexuality than some of her European contemporaries, such as Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, or Arthur Schnitzler. Her restraint is conspicuous in view of the fact that she wrote at a time when there was an increasing awareness of and interest in female sexuality, embodied in the work of, among others, Sigmund Freud and Henry Havelock Ellis. Wharton's relative lack of interest in depicting the adulterous affair itself, including its sexual dimension, was not only dictated by the limitations set by publishers and the reading public. For Wharton, women's dissatisfaction and unhappiness apparently had more to do with their social position than with their psychological make-up or their subconscious, unfulfilled urges. She appears to have been interested mainly in the social implications of female adultery, which she addressed by zooming in on the outcome of or the response to the affair, rather than the affair as such.[8] She wanted to emphasize that the liberation of women from the restrictions of a patriarchal society lay in emotional and spiritual, rather than sexual freedom.

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[8] Several critics have attempted to show the influence of Freud's work on Wharton's life and work. See for example: Kathy Grafton, "Degradation and Forbidden Love in Edith Wharton's *Summer*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.4 (Winter 1995): 350-366; Dale M. Bauer, *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (Madison, WI, [etc.]: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) 73-76; Jenni Dyman, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1996) 54-56, 109-110; Gloria C. Erlich, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1992) 11-15. However, Wharton displayed no overt interest in Freud's theories (Benstock, 243) and, in fact, spoke disparagingly of them. What she appears to have objected to were not Freud's views on sexuality, but his emphasis on the role of the subconscious. In a letter to her friend Bernard Berenson, Wharton discusses the forthcoming stay of a mutual young friend with him and his wife Mary: "Above all, please ask Mary not to befuddle her with Freudianism & all its jargon. She'd take to it like a duck to – sewerage. And what she wants is to develop the *conscious*, & not grub after the sub-conscious. She wants to be taught first to see, to attend, to reflect" (LEW, 451; Wharton's italics). Dale Bauer points out that Wharton appears to have felt that Freud's psychology of women "left out the economics of women's oppression, relying as it did on seemingly universalist claims about complexes and instincts" (Bauer, 65). Bauer suggests that Wharton was familiar with the work of Henry Havelock Ellis, and that her later novels (*Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*) show that she was "attuned [. . .] to the new discourses of the sexologists, especially those arguing for the compatability of artistic and sexual expression" (Bauer, 139).

At the same time, Wharton appears to have been aware of the effect which the omission of information has on the average reader and she exploited this as a narrative strategy. Susan Lanser suggests that not relating certain events or facts, in fact, draws attention to them and thereby increase their importance. She argues that "[w]hile an event given considerable textual space might ordinarily signal an event's significance, we would probably agree that if a narrator declines on grounds of propriety to describe a scene of sexual consummation, the event would not lose its weight; its impact might even be heightened" (Lanser 1981, 203). She concludes that "information can be conveyed through certain kinds of silence" (Lanser 1981, 204). Lanser is referring here to the amount of information provided by the narrator, but I want to extend her argument to the way in which Wharton administered information. She employs a variety of devices to underline the secrecy with which the adulterous affair is enveloped or the refusal to acknowledge it. Firstly, ellipsis, a familiar narrative device in Wharton's work, invites the reader to fill in the details of an affair which is not mentioned out loud. Secondly, the evasive and euphemistic language of narrators and characters both reflects and forms a comment on society's refusal to talk about female adultery and to acknowledge its occurrence. And thirdly, the emphasis on the conspiracy of silence which surrounds an illicit affair, and in some instances by the emphatic use of the word silence, enhances the importance of secrecy. The effect of the employment of these rhetorical devices accentuates the significance of the adultery.

In "The Line of Least Resistance," we are not told, but are meant to infer that Mr. Mindon discovers that his wife is having an adulterous affair: "He stooped to gather the bit of paper from the floor. As he picked it up his eye caught the words; he smoothed the page and read on. . . ." (LRR/CSS 1, 219). The use of ellipsis here "demand[s] of the reader a mental initiative."[9] The reader is expected to fill in the blank, which, in this case, is not particularly difficult. The reader's characterization of Millicent Mindon and the Mindon household, and the mentioning of a house guest by the name of Frank Antrim, whom Mr. Mindon "had schooled himself, not without difficulty, into thinking [. . .] a charming fellow" (LRR/CSS 1, 218), has already alerted the reader. Husbands that learn about their wives' infidelity by finding love letters is moreover a literary tradition, as I have discussed in chapter 2. The omission of a direct reference to Millicent Mindon's adultery mirrors society's persistent refusal to talk about and thereby acknowledge what is going on.[10] Mindon's

[9] Jean Frantz Blackall, "Edith Wharton's Art of Ellipsis," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 17.2 (1987): 156. Blackall points out that ellipsis is "a pervasive characteristic of Wharton's style," which she used in a "highly calculated and contrived way" (145). She distinguishes a variety of effects brought about by Wharton's use of ellipsis.

[10] In an early letter to Wharton, Henry James calls "The Line of Least Resistance" a "brilliant little tale," but he adds: "[I]t only suffers a little, I think, from one's not having a *direct* glimpse of the husband's provoking causes – literally provoking ones. However, you may very well say that there are two sides to that; that one can't do everything in 6000 words, one must narrowly choose (& à *qui* le dites-vous?) & that the complete non-vision of Millicent and her gentleman was a less evil that the frustrated squint to which you would have been at best reduced. Either

peers, who visit him in his hide-out, skilfully allude to Millicent's transgression without naming it, thereby implying that it never took place or should at least not be allowed to disrupt the social order. They point out to Mindon that it is up to him to reveal that he is no longer "the chief object of [his] wife's affection" (LRR/CSS 1, 225), but that he could also consider not making it public, for "[u]nder certain conditions, [. . .] what is unknown may be said to be nonexistent" (LRR/CSS 1, 226). The consistent evasion effectively exemplifies the conspiracy of silence with regard to taboo subjects that dominates communication in nineteenth-century society, and which is so pregnantly expressed in "The shade of those our days that had no tongue," the subtitle of Wharton's story "The Long Run." The tacit agreement not to discuss certain issues makes it possible to disregard their causes and to perpetuate the *status quo.*

This is exactly what Lydia Tillitson, in "Souls Belated," objects to. She realizes that her affair has not brought her the freedom to determine her own life, for "[h]er husband, in casting her off, had virtually flung her at Gannett" (SB/CSS 1, 107). She knows that her situation is "the subject of curious speculation over afternoon tea tables and in club corners" (SB/CSS 1, 107). Even in transgressing the marital laws, one is expected to play by the rules:

> The men would probably back Gannett to 'do the decent thing;' but the ladies' eyebrows would emphasize the worthlessness of such enforced fidelity; and after all, they would be right. She had put herself in a position where Gannett 'owed' her something; where, as a gentleman, he was bound to 'stand the damage.' (SB/CSS 1, 107)

The definitive end of her marriage, which is announced by the arrival of Lydia's divorce decree, obliquely referred to by Lydia and Gannett as "the *thing*" (SB/CSS 1, 105), forces the lovers to decide what they are going to do with their lives, a subject which they are only too keen to avoid. When we meet them in the railway carriage, they are silent. The narrator remarks: "It was one of the misfortunes of their situation that they were never busy enough to necessitate, or even to justify, the postponement of unpleasant discussions. If they avoided a question it was obviously, unconcealably because the question was disagreeable" (SB/CSS 1, 105). As the story progresses, the lovers start discussing their situation, and Lydia is shown to be extremely capable of expressing her objections against a return into society. Like Paulina in "The Long Run," she turns out to be a fluent advocate of a non-conformist life. Lydia and Gannett are forced to acknowledge, however, that their views of the future differ fundamentally. Whereas Gannett is ready to accept the life that is mapped out for them, Lydia recoils. In the final scene, which shows her

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do them or don't (directly) touch them – such was doubtless your instinct." (*Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters, 1900-1915*) 32. Apparently, James saw Wharton's choice not to refer to Millicent's adultery directly as a consequence of her choice for the short story genre. He seems not to have recognized or appreciated the omission as part of Wharton's decision to focus exclusively on the deceived husband and, moreover, as part of her strategy of indirectness.

wavering between running away and returning to the kind of life she had wanted to escape, not a word is spoken. The closing scene thus mirrors the opening scene, in which the lovers are reluctant to discuss their situation. In the final scene, everything has been said, and we watch Lydia through Gannett's eyes, as she contemplates the options that are open to her, before she in the end silently conforms.

The effects of a socially desirable silence are made palpably explicit in "Atrophy." Nora Frenway and her lover's sister play a verbal cat-and-mouse game when Nora hopes to be admitted to her terminally ill lover. Reluctant, even now, to reveal the true motive for her visit, Nora tries to penetrate the icy wall of politeness which Jane Aldis has erected. Their conversation is a masterful, but painful exercise in elusion.

> "Miss Aldis – I must tell you – I came to see – "
> "How he was? So very friendly of you. He would appreciate it, I know. Christopher is so devoted to his friends."
> "But you'll – you'll tell him that I – "
> "Of course. That you came on purpose to ask about him. As soon as he's a little bit stronger."
> "But I mean – now?" (A/CSS 2, 508)

Nora has been desperate to keep the nature of her relationship with Christopher a secret and she realizes too late that her behaviour has "excited curiosity by her very affectation of indifference" (A/CSS 2, 505). The effect of her strategy has alerted the suspicion of her lover's sister, who uses her position of power to humble Nora. It is an excellent example of how deliberate omission may draw unlooked-for attention. Miss Aldis revenges herself by breaking the silence which Nora has been desperate to maintain:

> "So kind – I shall never forget your kindness. Coming all this way, when you might so easily have telephoned from town. Do please tell Mr. Frenway how I appreciated it. You will remember to tell him, won't you?" [. . .] "But, no; I won't trouble you; I'll write to thank him myself." (A/CSS 2, 509)

Again, nothing is said explicitly, but the consequences of Miss Aldis's actions are evident to the female protagonist and no less so to the reader. Nora's affair will be exposed, endangering her marriage and her social position. In this late story – "Atrophy" dates from 1927 – the exposure of an adulterous affair is as threatening as it ever was. The modernization of society, Wharton implies, has not changed the old-fashioned moral standards that restrict women in their freedom. In spite of the seemingly relaxed attitude towards moral issues of modern society, the private living sphere has remained as judgemental and enclosing as it has always been.

Stories like "The Line of Least Resistance," "Atrophy," and "Souls Belated" all address the conspiracy of silence which surrounds female adultery in nineteenth-century society. Wharton enhances her discussion with the help of rhetorical devices that support female adultery as something that one does not talk about. In other stories, such as "His Father's Son," "The Muse's Tragedy," and "The Pretext," Wharton explores the notion of silence as a way of prolonging the illusion and preserving the beauty and magic of an adulterous love. Especially if that love is not reciprocated, putting things into words may disturb the illusion of an affair that never really existed. Whereas society's conspiracy of silence is aimed at ignoring the existence of the adulterous affair, the policy of silence of these protagonists is aimed at creating an adulterous affair that never was.

In "The Pretext," the mousy Mrs. Ransom entreats her would-be lover Guy Dawnish not to verbalize his emotions, in order not to disturb her illusion of a perfect romance. Mrs. Ransom's sedate, small-town existence has changed dramatically with the arrival of a young Englishman. His European background enchants her:

> Every one of the photographs opened a window on the life Margaret had been trying to picture since she had known him – a life so rich, so romantic, so packed – in the mere casual vocabulary of daily life – with historic reference and poetic allusions, that she felt almost oppressed by the distant whiff of its air. The very words he used fascinated and bewildered her. (P/CSS 1, 638)

She is swept off her feet by the mere fact that he pays attention to her and thinks that her feelings are reciprocated. When he announces that he has something important to say to her she stops him:

> "What do you want me to do?" he asked in a low tone.
> "*Not* to tell me!" she breathed on a deep note of entreaty.
> "*Not* to tell you – ?"
> "Anything – anything – just to leave our . . . our friendship . . . as it has been – as – as a painter, if a friend asked him, might leave a picture – not quite finished, perhaps, . . . but all the more exquisite . . ." [. . .]
> "Don't you see," she hurried on, "don't you *feel* how much safer it is – yes, I'm willing to put it so! – how much safer to leave everything undisturbed . . . just as . . . as it has grown of itself . . . without trying to say: 'It's this or that' . . . ? It's what we each choose to call it ourselves, after all, isn't it? Don't let us try to find a name that . . . that we should both agree upon . . . we probably shouldn't succeed." She laughed abruptly. "And ghosts vanish when one names them!" she ended with a break in her voice. (P/CSS 1, 643)

A real love affair would be unimaginable for the neat professor's wife, who has grown old before her time. At the mere thought "a flush of guilt swept over her – vague reminiscences of French novels and opera plots" (P/CSS 1, 644). She prefers to make do with "her one hour" (P/CSS 1, 644), knowing that

> [s]he had been loved – extraordinarily loved. But he had chosen that she should know of it by his silence rather than by his speech. He had understood that only on those terms could their transcendant communion continue – that he must lose her to keep her. To break that silence would be like spilling a cup of water in a waste of sand. There would be nothing left for her thirst. (P/CSS 1, 649)

Mrs. Ransom gives in to the intensely romantic idea of love as a mystical union of kindred souls. Her "inexhaustible curiosity on the subject of the growth of English Gothic" (P/CSS 1, 649) is part of her new look on life. Her discovery of the real reason for Guy Dawnish's confidentiality forms a rude awakening. She has only been used as a pretext to cover up Dawnish's romance with another, much younger, woman.

In "His Father's Son," the young Ronald Grew has, after his mother's death, been given to read the letters written to her by a famous pianist. On the basis of their contents, Ronald has come to the conclusion that he is not his father's son, but the product of an illicit affair of his mother with this foreign musician, Fortuné Dolbrowsky. He is keen to maintain the illusion of being the son of a famous artist, rather than of the buckle manufacturer Mason Grew, and is therefore reluctant to confront the latter with his discovery. When this can no longer be avoided, his father is forced to reveal the truth behind the letters, and his son is in for a surprise. Mason Grew has always kept silent about the curious relationship between his wife and Fortuné Dolbrowsky, whose portrait "on the wall of Mr. Grew's sitting-room commemorated the only exquisite hour of his life" (HFS/CSS 2, 42). Shortly after their marriage, Mason Grew and his young wife went to a concert of "the great Dolbrowsky" (HFS/CSS 2, 48), which left a stunning impression on the newly-weds: "Their evening had been magically beautiful, and even Addie, roused from her usual inexpressiveness, had waked into a momentary semblance of life" (HFS/CSS 2, 48-49). Wanting to express their admiration and thanks, she writes a letter to Dolbrowsky, which forms the beginning of a life-long correspondence.

We do not get to read Dolbrowsky's letters; we only infer from Ronald's response to them that they are romantic letters. In the absence of textual evidence, the reader is invited to fill in this blank. The reader's interpretation of the letters' purport is determined by the contextual evidence that we are given, in the form of the artist's portrait, bearing the dedication "*Adieu, Adèle*", and in the form of the evasive and shamefaced way in which Ronald finally confronts his father with what he believes to be the big secret in his parent's life. Their talk is dictated by Ronald's reluctance to state his suspicions openly, indicated by unfinished sentences and "a veritable cascade of Wharton ellipses"

(White, 20). It is Mason Grew who finally spells out his son's suspicions, – "that you were Fortuné Dolbrowksy's son" (HFS/CSS 2, 45) – to which Ronald is said to make only "a mute sign of assent" (HFS/CSS 2, 45). Mason Grew's ensuing confession reveals a secret which is highly surprising. The letters which Fortuné Dolbrowsky wrote to Mrs. Grew over a number of months do not in fact "tell their own story" (HFS/CSS 2, 46), as Ronald assumes. They were written in response to letters written by Mason Grew, copied out and signed by his obliging wife. Whereas Fortuné Dolbrowsky thought he was corresponding with a female fan, he was in fact receiving letters written by her husband. For Mason Grew, the correspondence gave him the things that he was "starving for – music, and good talk, ideas" (HFS/CSS 2, 48) and which provided life-long spiritual nourishment: "There was nothing beautiful he didn't see, nothing fine he didn't feel. For six months I breathed his air, and I've lived on it ever since" (HFS/CSS 2, 48). "But he must have thought your letters very beautiful – to go on as he did," Ronald concludes (HFS/CSS 2, 48). What appeared to be a straightforward adulterous affair turns out to have been a much more unlikely relationship, which has clear homo-erotic undertones. Both father and son had wanted to keep silent about the affair, each determined to maintain the illusion of a romantic attachment that never existed. Ronald Grew is indeed in that sense every inch his father's son.

Letters play an equally important role in the misconception of Mary Anerton's friendship with the famous poet Vincent Rendle in "The Muse's Tragedy." In the previous chapter, I discussed the role of Mary Anerton's final letter to her fiancé Danyers, in which she finally breaks her persistent silence about her affair with Rendle. The affair was considered socially acceptable by virtue of the fact that she was the famous poet's muse, and Mrs. Anerton took great pains to secure this exclusive role, for it bound Rendle to her. As her old friend Mrs. Memorall tells Danyers: "I never was allowed a peep at *him*; none of her old friends met him, except by accident. Ill-natured people say that was the reason she kept him so long" (MT/CSS 1, 68-69).[11] In order to maintain the illusion for herself, as much as for the outside world, Mrs. Anerton constructed her own reality. She fed the rumours of an affair, even after Rendle's death, in editing his letters to her.

> The critics, you may remember, praised the editor for his commendable delicacy and good taste (so rare in these days!) in omitting from the correspondence all personal allusions, all those *détails intimes* which should be kept sacred from the public gaze.

[11] There is conspicuous parallel between "His Father's Son" and "The Muse's Tragedy." The relation between Mason Grew and the pianist Dolbrowsky is not unlike that of Mr. Anerton, the Muse's husband and the poet Vincent Rendle. Mrs. Anerton's old friend Mrs. Memorall explains to Danyers that Mr. Anerton "was really much more ridiculous" (MT/CSS 1, 69) about the friendship with Vincent Rendle than his wife. She claims that the Anertons never separated, despite the consistent rumours about Mrs. Anerton's adultery, because "[h]e never would have left Rendle" (MT/CSS, 69). According to Mrs. Memorall, Mary Anerton "saw he was the kind of man who was fated to make himself ridiculous, and she never interfered with his natural tendencies" (MT/CSS 1, 69).

> They referred, of course, to the asterisks in the letters to Mrs. A. Those letters I myself prepared for publication; that is to say, I copied them out for the editor, and every now and then I put in a line of asterisks to make it appear that something had been left out. (MT/CSS 1, 75)

The asterisks, like ellipses, were meant to entice the reader's imagination and alert the reader to the existence of a transgressive relationship. As Denise Witzig says: "The absence of sexual intimacy in the relationship is thus disguised in its own textual absence; the subversive point is in the muse's constructing it, actually writing the gaps into the text to create presence of meaning" (Witzig, 269). The asterisks can be interpreted as a mute sign of Mrs. Anerton's adulterous desire, which she cannot talk about because she knows that it is not reciprocated. The illusion of her love affair can only be prolonged as long as she keeps silent about her relationship with Rendle. But meeting Danyers forces her to acknowledge that she has been living a lie. In confessing that "[t]he asterisks were a sham – *there was nothing to leave out*" (MT/CSS 1, 75), she finally deconstructs her make-believe life and affair.

In both stories, the omission of facts in letters leads to the misrepresentation of reality, but at the same time to the creation of a new, desired reality. In "His Father's Son," Mason Grew omitted to tell Dolbrowsky that it he was in fact corresponding with Mr. rather than Mrs. Grew. It created and sustained the illusion of a romantic attachment, eluding not only Dolbrowsky and Ronald Grew, but also Mason Grew himself, who admits to his son: "Do you suppose he'd gone on writing if he'd ever seen me, Ronny?" (HFS/CSS 2, 48). Although Mason Grew knows that he has not been honest with the admired pianist, their correspondence has nevertheless filled an emptiness in his spiritual life. In "The Muse's Tragedy," the asterisks in Vincent Rendle's letters to Mrs. Anerton, suggesting the omission of explicit references to an adulterous relationship, form the visual proof that the reader is not allowed to know all there is, but is at the same time invited to draw the obvious conclusion. The fact that the asterisks are in themselves a sham creates a double elusion/illusion, like Shakespeare's boys playing girls playing boys. These stories exemplify the conscious or unconscious desire to sustain the illusion of romance where there is none, by manipulating the textual representation of reality.

Wharton's 'tact of omission,' then, gives expression to two different aspects of illicit love. On the one hand, it reflects the desire to sustain an illusion of a romantic attachment which never existed and which is best preserved when it is not talked about. On the other hand, it mirrors the way in which nineteenth-century society chose to deal with adultery. By refusing to refer to it openly or to discuss its incentives, society could deny its occurrence and its significance with regard to male-female relations, and thus secure the social *status quo*.

6.2. The "Beatrice Palmato fragment": Edith Wharton's experiment with erotic fiction

In her published fiction, Wharton tended to be reticent in discussing or depicting sexuality. She conformed to the dominant fictional practice of treating it as something which one did not speak about, and certainly not in public. She dared to address it explicitly, however, in a text which is commonly referred to as the "Beatrice Palmato fragment." The fact that she herself entitled it "Unpublishable Fragment" indicates that she knew that it would not be considered fit for publication, at least not during her lifetime. The text forms a singular addition to Wharton's female adultery short stories because of its frank treatment of the role of sexuality in a relationship which is both adulterous and incestuous.

The "Beatrice Palmato fragment" is a text which describes a sexual encounter between a man, Mr. Palmato, and a young woman. It is generally accepted that the fragment is linked to a story with a particularly grim plot about Mr. Palmato's incestuous relationships with his daughters. The story was never written, but its synopsis has survived. On the basis of the synopsis, we can identify the young woman in the fragment as Mr. Palmato's younger daughter Beatrice.[12] Critics have generally read the fragment in relation to the synopsis and have, as a result, interpreted the text as describing an incestuous father-daughter relationship which is momentarily sexually gratifying for both, but which ultimately leads to the destruction of the woman. However, if we consciously separate the fragment from the synopsis, it loses much of the disturbing quality of an incest narrative, while the adultery of the female protagonist gains in significance. I propose that the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" can be read as a text in its own right and that it has the narrative unity and polished finish of a short story. Read in this way, the text forms an interesting addition to Wharton's female adultery stories. Unrestrained by the laws of the literary market, Wharton appears to have used the text to experiment with erotic writing and to address the sexual desires of women and the role of sexuality in marriage more openly and explicitly than she could in the work which she intended for publication.

I will first discuss the synopsis of the unwritten story about Beatrice Palmato and her father, before turning to the "Beatrice Palmato fragment." The story appears to have been planned as part of a collection entitled *Powers of Darkness*, as is indicated on the cover sheet of the synopsis (Griffin Wolff, 300). It represents one of several instances in Wharton's work which reveal

[12] R.W.B. Lewis points out that the choice of the name Beatrice suggests allusions to a sixteenth-century incest victim, Beatrice Cenci, upon whose life P.B. Shelley based his verse play "The Cenci" (Lewis, 525). Louise K. Barnett, in her article "American novelists and the 'Portrait of Beatrice Cenci,'" *The New England Quarterly*, 53.2 (June 1980): 168-183, points out that Wharton refers to the portrait of the famous incest victim in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Mother's Recompense*, and that Wharton mentions in *A Backward Glance* that she bought reproductions of the painting on one of her early trips to Rome.

her literary interest in the subject of incest.[13] The synopsis introduces Mr. Palmato, a banker who lives in London with his wife and three children, of whom Beatrice is the youngest.[14] After the mysterious suicide of Beatrice's elder sister, her mother has a series of nervous breakdowns and dies in a mental hospital. Her brother is subsequently sent off to boarding school, while Beatrice remains with her father. The relationship between father and daughter is very close, and continues to be so after Mr. Palmato's remarriage. At the age of 18, Beatrice unexpectedly marries, settles down to a rather sedate life, and has two children. One day Beatrice's husband comes home after a week's absence. She sees him hugging their young daughter and starts screaming at him, snatching the little girl from his arms. She flees from the room and commits suicide. Beatrice's brother later tells her husband that Beatrice and her elder sister were sexually abused by their father. It is suggested that seeing her daughter being hugged by her husband brought back memories of her youth which were too painful to confront and awakened the fear that her daughter would also become the victim of incest, while she, like her own mother, was unable to intervene.

Wharton was probably referring to this synopsis when, with reference to Faulkner and Céline, she wrote to Bernard Berenson in 1935: "I've got an incest donnée up my sleeve that wd make them all look like nursery-rhymes – but business is too bad to sell such Berquinades nowadays" (LEW, 589). She was apparently still planning to use the idea which she conceived years earlier, but she was also aware of the fact that it would probably be impossible to get such a story published. It is likely that, around the same time that she wrote the synopsis, she also wrote the "Unpublishable Fragment," which later became known as the "Beatrice Palmato fragment."[15] There is no doubt that the synopsis and the fragment belong together. However, despite the evident link between the fragment and the synopsis, there is no obvious place in the story where the fragment might have been fitted in. This suggests that, although Wharton used the word 'fragment' in the title that she gave to the text, she never intended it as part of a larger whole. Griffin Wolff suggests that Wharton wrote the fragment "to articulate fully to herself the precise nature, feeling, and history of the incestuous experience which was to lie behind and to

[13] Wharton's interest in the literary use of incest has been discussed by several critics, among them: Griffin Wolff, 303-308, 379-380, 412-415; White, 41-49; Erlich, 40-42, 100-101, 126-131, 145-146; Bauer, 36, 45-47, 57, 73-75. See also: Adeline R. Tintner, "Mothers, Daughters, and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton," *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, eds. Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 147-156. Tintner argues that the female protagonist of Wharton's novel *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate Clephane, is so shocked to discover that her daughter is about to marry Kate's former lover because she sees her lover in the role of her daughter's father. The relationship between the lover and the daughter as a result has overtones of an incestuous act.

[14] For the complete text of the synopsis, see Lewis, 545-546.

[15] Lewis argues that Wharton wrote the story outline and the fragment around 1935, perhaps on the basis of Wharton's apparent reference to it in her letter to Berenson. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, however, concludes that they were written around 1919 (Griffin Wolff, 407-415).

color the actual narrative" (Lewis, 544).[16] Lewis suggests that Wharton wanted to experiment with writing a sexually explicit text, that "she wanted to show [. . .] that she could write elegant pornography as well as her usual fiction of manners, implication, and insinuation" (Lewis, 525). Wharton's eagerness to prove not only to herself, but also to others, that she was capable of this kind of writing would explain why she saved it and gave it such a telling title. I want to hypothesize that Wharton did not write it as a fragment which was meant to be inserted into the longer story, but instead conceived it as a short story in its own right.[17] The disengaging of the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" from the longer story and its synopsis invites an alternative reading of the text, one that gives more emphasis to the adulterous nature of the depicted relationship and the fact that the woman finds sexual satisfaction in an extramarital relationship rather than in her marriage.

The story, as I will now refer to it, consists almost entirely of a detailed account of a sexual encounter between a man and a young woman. Significantly, the man is consistently referred to as Mr. Palmato and not as (the) father. The young woman's name is not mentioned. As a result, if we could not link the fragment to the synopsis, we could not be absolutely sure that the man in the scene is actually the young woman's father. His calling the young woman "my own," and "[m]y little girl" (BP, 548), is hardly conclusive evidence. The omission of a direct reference to the father-daughter bond suggests that Wharton did not want to emphasize the incestuous nature of the relationship. However, I do not mean to deny that Wharton envisaged the story's protagonists to be the Mr. Palmato and Beatrice which she introduced in the synopsis, and I will therefore refer to the female character as Beatrice, even though, as pointed out, her name is not actually mentioned in the story.

The story is narrated by a third-person narrator who uses the young woman as a focalizer. The narrator focuses on transcribing her experience, rather than that of the man. The event takes place a week after her marriage. It becomes clear that the two characters have had a long-standing sexual relationship, but that they have not had sexual intercourse. Now that the woman is married, their relationship enters into a new phase. The story starts *in medias res* with: "'I have been, you see,' he added gently, 'so perfectly patient – '" (BP, 547). We do not know what the two have been talking about, but the suggestion is that there has been some verbal foreplay and that we are about to witness something which has been delayed for some time. Mr.

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[16] Lewis cites a conversation which he had with Griffin Wolff.

[17] The editors of *The Penguin Book of Erotic Stories by Women* evidently thought that it could be read as such and included it in their collection (Richard Glyn Jones and Susan Williams, eds., *The Penguin Book of Erotic Stories by Women*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996, 104-107). The collection also includes Kate Chopin's "The Storm." In their introduction, the editors comment on the fact that the stories they selected were "self-contained and complete in themselves" (p. vii), even when taken from longer works. The editors took a number of liberties in editing the text. They gave it their own title: "My Little Girl," and they cut the first and last line of the original fragment. They probably wanted to emphasize that the story could be read independently by omitting references to events which fall outside the scope of the story. By doing so, as I will argue, the editors impaired the narrative unity of the story and influenced its interpretation.

Palmato's "penetrating whisper" (BP, 547) presages the sexual penetration in which the story culminates.

The relationship is not merely based on mutual consent, but also gives intense sexual pleasure to both. The sexual intercourse is described as a physically satisfying experience for the young woman and, moreover, as liberating. Her nakedness gives her a sense of freedom: "[S]he was free, lying before him in her fresh young nakedness" (BP, 547). Whereas previously their love-making has apparently taken place in darkness, "now it was light, she was uncovered, and looking downward, beyond his dark silver-sprinkled head, she could see her own parted knees and outstretched ankles and feet" (BP, 547). Beatrice clearly does not perceive it as shameful to watch herself in the sexual act. Her aroused desire is directly linked to her recent marriage. She is said to respond to Mr. Palmato's touch "as of old, only now with the more passionate eagerness bred of privation, and of the dull misery of her marriage" (BP, 547). The memory of her husband's "rough advances" (BP, 547) during her wedding night are soon forgotten, as "the old swooning sweetness [is] creeping over her" (BP, 548). The use of the word 'old' in these two instances underlines that this is not the first sexual encounter between the two. For the first time in their relationship, however, it culminates in sexual intercourse. This implies that Mr. Palmato has respected the socially and religiously prescribed rule – in nineteenth-century patriarchal society, at least – that a woman should be a virgin when she gets married. It also means that he is entering into competition with the husband, as indicated by the question with which the story ends: "'Was it . . . like this . . . last week?' he whispered" (BP, 548). The question is rhetorical, for Beatrice's physical response indicates that this experience allows her to shake off the unpleasant memories of the sex she has had within the confines of her marital bedroom.

The story's ending may appear very abrupt, as could be expected in the case of an unfinished fragment of text. I want to propose, however, that the ending can also be read as deliberate and significant, underlining my hypothesis that Wharton constructed the text as a short story in its own right. Hermione Lee points out that the text originally ended with Beatrice's exclamation: "Oh. . ." This line was crossed out in the manuscript (Lee, 588), suggesting that Wharton deliberated on the effectiveness of the ending and polished the text, as if she were preparing it to be read by others. The final line consequently consists of Mr. Palmato's elliptical question, which refers back to the beginning of the story. In the opening sentence, Mr. Palmato announces the sexual intercourse which has been delayed until after Beatrice's marriage and her deflowering during the wedding night, while in the final sentence, he asks her to compare the two experiences. Wharton appears to have constructed this ending purposefully, in order to create a finished narrative with a circular structure.

Critics have tended to focus on the incestuous, rather than the adulterous nature of the relationship between Mr. Palmato and Beatrice, primarily, as I pointed out above, because they read the fragment as part of the story that

Wharton intended to write. Incest is evidently thought to overshadow adultery as a taboo subject. This has considerably influenced the way the story has been appreciated. Lewis is intrigued by it, but refrains from judgement about its contents. He accepts that we can have no "assurance why Edith Wharton wrote just this story – just this *portion* of this story – at just this time, and why, having written it, she did not destroy it" (Lewis, 525; Lewis's italics). Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments: "Incest, as Edith Wharton renders it, is irresistibly attractive" (Griffin Wolff, 307). However, "it was – could only have been – the suppressed horror that lay *behind* the action of the tale and made it understandable. And the most striking thing of all is that this 'horror' is in no way abhorrent [. . .] And therein lies its real terror" (Griffin Wolff, 307; Griffin Wolff's italics). Gloria Erlich argues that "[b]y virtue of the dual perspective created by these separate versions [the fragment and the synopsis], Wharton offers a private and a social version of the same act – secret pleasure for a limited period within the daughter's consciousness, but the dire consequences when that daughter tries to move out of the enclosed relationship" (Erlich, 37-38).[18] Elizabeth Ammons is more outspokenly judgemental: "No matter how erotic the seduction scene in which Mr. Palmato has intercourse with his own daughter (and bear in mind that one can imagine a perfectly executed crime and not necessarily approve the deed), the finished story, unless Wharton had changed it radically, was going to present incest as an act that kills women" (Ammons 1980, 141). Is it significant that the female critics appear to be more disturbed by Wharton's fragment and synopsis than her male biographer? At any rate, they seem to be less inclined to accept that the sexual gratification which Beatrice finds in the relationship outweighs the power relation which is also part of it. This suggests a rather limited perspective on the material of these female critics.

If the fragment is treated as a story in its own right, as I have attempted to do here, the incestuous nature of the relationship remains ambiguous, while that other taboo, adultery, gains in relative significance. Beatrice's recent marriage links the story to the tradition of female adultery literature. The suggestion is that Beatrice's relationship with her new husband is not sexually satisfying, which incites her to continue the existing sexual relationship with another man. Mr. Palmato's remark that he is going to show her "what only you and I have the right to show each other" (BP, 547) even suggests a moral justification of the extramarital sexual relationship. Critics have often interpreted this remark as indicating that Mr. Palmato is asserting his paternal

[18] Cynthia Griffin Wolff stresses that the fragment is fiction, but at the same time points out an autobiographical link in *A Backward Glance.* She suggests that Wharton's childhood experience during a walk as a little girl with her father through the wintery streets of New York, with her little girl's hand in "the large safe hollow of her father's bare hand" (BG, 2), coloured subsequent fantasies of sexuality. The hand as a sexual organ and symbol was clearly part of those fantasies and Wharton therefore gave it such a prominent role in the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" (Griffin Wolff, 307). Both Gloria Erlich and Barbara White suggest that the "Beatrice Palmato fragment," together with the recurring use of incest in her fiction, reflect both Wharton's unsatisfying marriage and incestuous experiences in her childhood (Erlich, 36-39; White, 41-52).

right over his daughter.[19] I want to propose that it can also be interpreted as an invitation to Beatrice to reject the conjugal obligations towards her husband in favour of sexual gratification with a man to whom she is evidently physically attracted and with whom she has a strong emotional bond. As such, the story offers an interesting example in Wharton's work of the sexual motivation of the adulteress.[20] Beatrice cannot resist the promise of sexual gratification with another man. The fact that that man is her father emphasizes the power of her sexual needs and desire, for it makes her break every rule in the book: she not only breaks her marriage vows, disregarding moral and religious rules, she also, it could be argued, acts against the laws of nature. Wharton appears to have wanted to write a story in which the sexual dimension of the adulterous affair predominates and the social and economic complications are momentarily unimportant. Beatrice allows the "uncontrollable emotion" that Kate Chopin defined as the essence of love (KCPP, 219) to determine her actions, much like Chopin's Calixta did in "The Storm." In terms of the rendition of the sexual experience, however, Chopin's story pales by comparison.

The "Beatrice Palmato fragment" is a singular piece of fiction in the *oeuvre* of a writer who was primarily known for her biting satire of contemporary American society and who accepted the restrictions of the literary market with regard to controversial issues. The fact that she wrote this story suggests that she sometimes wanted to write as freely about sexuality as some of the French writers she admired, who were much more sexually candid than she was ever allowed to be. Lewis names Alfred de Musset's *Gamiani* as a possible literary source for the story (Lewis, 544). Hermione Lee suggests Wharton was always "trying to be more French" (Lee, 589) and that she was inspired by contemporary writers like Gide and Cocteau, whom she knew personally, and by Colette, whose work she had started to read with great pleasure in the 1920s (Lee, 589).[21] She saw the liberal attitude of the French

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[19] Katherine Joslin argues that, by insisting on "the primacy of sexual coupling with his daughter," Mr. Palmato "exemplifies the extreme patriarch who refuses to allow his daughter any life of her own." Katherine Joslin, "'Fleeing the Sewer:' Edith Wharton, George Sand and Literary Innovation," *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, eds. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price (New York, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1993), 350.

[20] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see Mr. Palmato as a father "who refuses to surrender his daughter to the socioeconomic system." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved," *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century.* Volume 2: *Sexchanges.* (New Haven, [etc.]: Yale University Press, 1989), 166. Gilbert and Gubar read the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" in relation to Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), who argued that the nineteenth-century bourgeois wife was primarily seen as an exponent of the husband's wealth and power. Wharton's work has been connected with Veblen by other critics, among others: Ammons 1980, 28-29; Reiner Kornetta, *Das Korsett im Kopf: Ehe und Ökonomie in den Kurzgeschichten Edith Whartons* (Frankfurt am Main, [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1996).

[21] Lewis points out that Wharton in her early seventies expressed great admiration for Colette. "She looked upon the prolific and brilliant French novelist as 'one of the greatest writers of our time,' a woman who could communicate directly to her about the infinitely subtle nature of female passion and about 'the tears in sensual things'" (Lewis, 520). There is an interesting parallel between the hand as a phallic image in the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" and in Colette's short story "The Hand" (1924). I do not mean to suggest that Wharton took this image from

towards love, marriage and sexuality, which she had praised in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, reflected in the work of the writers of her adopted country. Although her official work continued to be about American society and aimed at American readers, she also wanted to show to herself, and perhaps also to her posthumous readers, that she, like "the new Frenchwoman" (FWM, 98) whom she admired, was "*grown up*" (FWM, 100; Wharton's italics) and could write candidly about all facets of womanhood. Whereas in her published female adultery stories she displayed caution with regard to the role of sexuality, she dared to address it openly in a story which was not meant to be read during her lifetime, but which she seems not to have objected to being found after her death.

6.3. "The Life Apart": Edith Wharton's personal story of female adultery

Edith Wharton was understandably secretive about her extramarital affair with Morton Fullerton. She had, after all, a reputation to think of. The fact that she decided to write about the affair in a separate journal and take steps to ensure its survival can be seen as an act of defiance against the prevailing attitude towards female adultery. However, the text in which she broke the silence about her affair is at the same time characterized by the 'tact of omission' which she also employed in her female adultery stories, suggesting that she always retained a sense of ambivalence about her marital transgression.

Edith Wharton appears to have expected that the publication of her memoirs in 1933 was unlikely to deter future biographers. Lewis says that he had found Wharton to be "an uncommonly cooperative" subject, because she had made sure that her biographer had "as complete a record as possible" at his disposal (Lewis, xi). She anticipated the probing into her life and letters by leaving behind a packet of papers, labelled, in her own hand, "For My Biographer" (Lewis, xi).[22] Moreover, she destroyed relatively few of her private papers and was very selective in the process. All through her life, she had been a prolific letter writer and about four thousand of her letters remain (LEW, 3). Their survival has, of course, largely depended on whether the recipients kept them and on what happened to their estates. Thus, most of her letters to Henry James have not survived, because he destroyed them. In some cases, Wharton herself intervened. She burned all the letters which she wrote to her oldest, and perhaps dearest, friend Walter Berry, and she may have wanted to do the same with those she wrote to her lover Morton Fullerton. Their

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Colette, however; after all, the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" probably predates Colette's story (see note 15).

[22] According to Lewis, "[t]he packet consisted mostly of letters relating to her husband's various illnesses and her divorce from him in 1913" (Lewis, xi).

unexpected discovery in 1980 was something of a literary sensation.[23] Apart from letters, she also left a number of other documents, such as diaries, unpublished poetry and fiction, as well as notes and ideas for future use in her work.

One of the most striking documents which has survived is the journal which she wrote during the time when she had an adulterous relationship herself. For a long time, it was believed that the lover who featured in the journal was Walter Berry, until Lewis discovered that Wharton's lover was, in fact, Morton Fullerton (Lewis, 183-232; Benstock, 169-170 and 175-185; Lee, 308-344).[24] I already pointed out in the previous chapter that Wharton did not mention this affair in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*. The fact that Wharton allowed the "Love Diary," as it is commonly called, to survive strongly suggests that she wanted future audiences to be aware of aspects of her personality which had remained hidden during her lifetime. One of these aspects was her attitude towards strong emotional attachments and sexuality. Years after his affair with Wharton had ended, Morton Fullerton wrote to Elisina Tyler, one of Wharton's best women friends, who was considering writing Wharton's biography: "Please seize the event, however delicate the problem, to dispel the myth of your heroine's frigidity" (Lewis, 222). Wharton had already taken care of this herself, however. As Lewis observes: "Properly discreet and evasive in her lifetime, she took determined steps to see that later generations would know her as she truly was" (Lewis, 526). She did this by fictionalizing parts of her life and by indulging in literary fantasies in a document which was not intended for immediate publication, but which, as I will argue, was nevertheless written with future readers in mind. As such it could be regarded as an example of *autofiction*.[25] Like her works of non-fiction, the journal serves to complement the authorial image which Wharton's readers had of her, revealing to future audiences a side of her authorship that was not determined by the restrictions of the literary market.

The "Love Diary" is a journal, spanning a period of seven months, in which Wharton recorded her emotional response to her relationship with Morton Fullerton. Although it was addressed to him, it was probably initially not meant for his eyes, unlike the numerous letters which she wrote to him in the same period. Critics have found it difficult to characterise the journal and have

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[23] After his death in 1927, Wharton went to Walter Berry's apartment in Paris, retrieved her letters to him and burned them (LEW, 5). In December 1908, she also asked Morton Fullerton to return "if they still survive – a few notes & letters of no value to your archives, but which happen to fill a deplorable lacuna in those of their writer" (LEW, 170). Fullerton did not comply with her request. It was not until 1980 that some 300 letters to him, mainly written between 1907 and 1915, were found (LEW, 11).

[24] See also: Marion Mainwaring, *Mysteries of Paris: The Quest for Morton Fullerton* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2001). Mainwaring was engaged by R.W.B. Lewis to research the Parisian phase of Edith Warton's life, and in particular her affair with Morton Fullerton.

[25] The French term *autofiction* is commonly used to refer to the literary genre which combines autobiography and fiction. Narrative aspects of the genre have been explored by critics such as Philippe Lejeune (*Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975)) and Gérard Genette ("Récit fictional, récit factuel," *Fiction et Diction* (Paris, Seuil, 1991)).

called it "curious."[26] Several critics have commented on its literary quality. Griffin Wolff says "[i]t was, perhaps, a special kind of travel book for Edith Wharton, who had written so many others, a memoir in which she recorded the essential moments of her passion so that she might keep them forever with her, look back upon them and remember" (Griffin Wolff, 147). Judy Simons calls it "a compelling narrative of a type she [Wharton] had never attempted before," and claims that "from the very beginning Edith Wharton conceived this journal as a deliberate and discrete work of art."[27] According to Lewis, Wharton looked upon her journal as a literary work, because "personal experience was never entirely real for her until it had been converted into literature" (Lewis, 224). He finds, however, that "in chillingly aesthetic terms, the journal cannot be ranked among Edith Wharton's best efforts," for despite "a wealth of honesty at its core," it is too full of clichés and "at times uncharacteristically adolescent" (Lewis, 224). Wharton's biographers have used the journal and her letters to Fullerton, in combination with her page-a-day diary, as complementary sources of biographical information, in order to piece together the story of Wharton's relationship with Fullerton.[28] However, I want to suggest that for Wharton the journal was also a text which she intended to be more than a private record of her emotional coming of age and that it constituted both a private communication with her lover and a literary experiment.

The journal can be read as a literary creation which, although written in the form of separate entries over an extended period, forms a consistent textual unity. As Simons observes: "Wharton's journal is a sustained record of a buoyant current of feeling *and* a contrived narrative from the pen of a practised writer. However genuinely Edith Wharton might have fallen in love, she could not help herself creating a literary *tour de force* out of the experience" (Simons, 138; Simons's italics). She may even have accepted, although perhaps unconsciously at the moment of writing, that the journal would at one point be read by others. Price and McBride comment: "One suspects [. . .] that Wharton at least half wished that the diary might finally be known. She kept the diary, after all, allowing it to become part of her literary papers" (Price and McBride, 668). I want to argue that, in writing the journal, she created a continuous narrative in which she fictionalized a significant period of her life, presenting herself as the female protagonist of a story about a transgressive love affair, what is more, *her* love affair. Her careful recreation of the setting of the affair betrays the awareness of a reader

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[26] Price and McBride, 669; Griffin Wolff, 147.

[27] Judy Simons, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990) 133-134.

[28] Lewis explains that Wharton kept two diaries during the first half of 1908. Apart from the journal, she kept a diary in which she recorded whom she had entertained and visited, and what plays, lectures and other social events she had attended. There is little of a private nature in this diary, although there are frequent references to M.F. "Many of these are in German, as though, by speaking of Fullerton in a language not only other than English but also other than that of the city and country in which they both resided, she could set their relationship at a distance, distinguish it from all the rest of her ongoing life, almost, in a sense enshrine it" (Lewis, 203). The choice of German may also have been motivated by the fear that the diary might fall into the wrong hands.

other than the addressee. It suggests that she aimed the story at a wider audience than just Fullerton. She regards Fullerton, as she indicates in the opening section of the journal, as "some one to talk to" (LA, 670); yet she seems, if only subconsciously at the moment of writing, aware of the fact that somebody else might be listening in. She therefore reverted to narrative and rhetorical strategies which she also employed in her fiction.

To begin with, she gave the journal a title, or rather two titles: "The Life Apart" and "*L'Âme close*." The French title was taken from a poem by the sixteenth-century poet Pierre Ronsard, which she cited in her page-a-day diary:

> Une tristesse dans l'âme close
> Me nourit, et non autre chose.
>
> [A sadness in my confined soul
> Nourishes me, and no other thing.][29]

The French title recalls Wharton's recurring theme of imprisonment. The English title, "The Life Apart," probably refers to the separate lives she and Fullerton continued to live, despite their close relationship; it moreover emphasizes Wharton's awareness that she had started to lead a double life. Her public life was extremely busy, filled with social engagements and therefore conducted in full view. Discreetly overlapping, however, there was that part of her life which she shared with Fullerton. Although they would meet in public places and Fullerton was known to belong to Wharton's circle of friends, it is thought that very few people were aware of the nature of their relationship.[30] The deliberate choice of the titles which she gave her journal, underlining its contents and meaning, strengthen the journal's literariness. In writing the journal, she adhered to many of the principles about the composition of short stories which she outlined in *The Writing of Fiction*. This can be recognized in the way Wharton structures her text, plays with the journal's implied readership, and introduces imagery and rhetoric that we know from her fiction. I will go into each of these aspects in more detail.

"The short story writer's first concern," Wharton wrote in *The Writing of Fiction*, "is what musicians call the 'attack.'" The writer should "know how to make a beginning," for the opening "ought to contain the germ of the whole"

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[29] Lewis, 191-192; Benstock, 177; Lee, 311. The English translation is my own. Wharton's biographers translate "l'âme close" as "shut-in" or "closed-down" soul. I prefer the translation 'confined,' because of its associations with Wharton's recurring theme of imprisonment, but also with parturition. The affair with Morton Fullerton was a period in which Wharton appears to have been highly aware of her emotional constraint, from which Fullerton to some extent released her. It also represents a period of artistic productivity.

[30] James introduced Morton Fullerton to Wharton. It is not absolutely certain that he knew that they were having an affair, although it seems likely that he did. Benstock claims that James "played 'facilitator-voyeur' to their affair" (Benstock, 170). Lee argues that James "was playing a subtle and ambiguous part" in the affair, but that he "certainly guessed what was going on" (Lee, 335).

(WF, 39). The opening sentence of the journal does her justice: "If you had not enclosed that sprig of wych-hazel in your note I should not have opened this long-abandoned book" (LA, 670). She explains that the witch-hazel is "the 'old woman's flower' – the flower that blooms in the autumn" (LA, 671). Finding it in the company of Fullerton signified for Wharton the possible start of a new phase in her life. When Fullerton sent her a sprig of witch-hazel a few days later – "& sent it without a word – thus telling me (as I choose to think!) that you knew what was in my mind when I found it blooming on that wet bank in the woods" (LA, 670) – she was hopeful that her feelings would be reciprocated. Thus the opening sentence of her account of her love affair with Fullerton immediately discloses what it will focus on: her emotional and sexual maturation, if not as an old woman, yet relatively late in life. As might be expected from an accomplished writer, she reintroduces the imagery at the end of her journal. In one of the last entries she exclaims: "How the wych-hazel has kept its promise, since it flowered in our hands last October! – Bring me, magic flower, one more day such as those – but dearer, nearer, by all these death-pangs of separation with which my heart is torn!" (LA, 682). Thus, she succeeds in emphasizing the unity of the text as a whole, giving what she in *The Writing of Fiction* calls "the touch of inevitableness to the conclusion" (WF, 38).

The journal is addressed to a specific person: Morton Fullerton. Meeting him formed the incentive to express herself in this new form. As she explains in her first entry:

> And so it happens that, finding myself – after so long! – with some one to talk to, I take up this empty volume, in which, long ago, I made one or two spasmodic attempts to keep a diary. For I had no one but myself to talk to, & it is absurd to write down what one says to one's self; but now I shall have the illusion that I am talking to you, & that – as when I picked up the wych-hazel – something of what I say will somehow reach you. . . . (LA, 670)

Fullerton is clearly the 'you' that is frequently addressed throughout the journal. A large part of the journal recalls or refers to time they spent together, trips they undertook, and things they said to each other. Sometimes Wharton only hints at them, as it were to jolt Fullerton's memory of shared experiences. On March 3rd, she reminds him of "[t]he other night at the theatre, when you came into the box – that little, dim baignoire (no. 13, I shall always remember!) I felt for the first time that indescribable current of communication flowing between myself & some one else" (LA, 672). On May 3rd, she recalls "our little minute, sitting outside on the steps in the sunshine; with the *'Dear, are you happy?'* that made it all yours & mine" (LA, 676). The fact that Fullerton is so clearly identifiable and present as the journal's addressee has led critics to regard it as a kind of serialized love letter. And indeed, there is a distinct similarity in tone and style between the journal and the many letters

and postcards that she wrote and sent to him in the same period. However, these were meant to be read by him, whereas, although addressed to him, the journal "was only provisionally meant for Fullerton's eyes" (Price and McBride, 667). She did eventually lend it to him on the eve of her departure to America. He returned it to her the next day, having written "those lines on the opposite page . . ." (LA, 681), which were torn out of the notebook and have as a result not survived.

"The Life Apart" is characterized by the textual gaps between the various entries. Price and McBride point out that the genre of the journal, much like the serialized novel, is "marked by the absences and gaps characteristic of works that stress the serial nature of their own production," and they refer to Wolfgang Iser in saying that "the omissions between parts of a text force readers to forge connections to gain an understanding of the text's continuity and overall meaning" (Price and McBride, 665-666). The more substantial gaps between the various entries in "The Life Apart" are of particular interest. The time between the first journal entries, for example, is considerable and consequently so are the textual gaps. The first entry of October 29th is followed by the enigmatic entry of November 27th ("Your letter from Paris . . ." (LA, 671)). We then jump to February 21st. The reader is made to infer that Wharton was not swept off her feet by an ardent suitor, who pursued her with vigour from the moment they first met, but instead was forced to make do with occasional signs of reciprocated feelings. In the first lines of the entry of February 21st, she indicates what this did to her, introducing the familiar house imagery and explicating the journal's French title:

> All these months I thought after all I had been mistaken; & my poor 'âme close' barred its shutters & bolted its doors again, & the dust gathered & the cobwebs thickened in the empty room, where for a moment I had heard an echo. . . . (LA, 671)

But Wharton continues with: "Then we went to Herblay" (LA, 671), indicating that a new phase in the relationship has begun.

The entries of February 21st and 22nd and March 3rd allow us a glimpse of the affair taking shape, as feelings of exhilaration and despair on Wharton's part alternate. There is another major textual gap between the entries of March 3rd and April 20th, which, like the entry of February 21st, opens with an explanation:

> I haven't written for six weeks or more. I have been afraid to write . . . Since then I have had my 'day' – two 'days' . . . one at Montfort, one at Provins. I have known 'what happy women feel' . . . with the pang, all through, every moment, of what heart-broken women feel! Ah, comme j'avais raison de vous ecrire [Oh, how right I was to write to you]: "I didn't know what it would be like." – (LA, 673)

From the end of April until May 31st, the entries succeed each other at brief, if irregular, intervals.[31] The reader is drawn into the affair, becoming almost a first-hand witness, and is made to co-experience Wharton's increasing passion for Fullerton. The final entry, dated June 12th, two weeks after her return to America, again opens with an explanation for her silence:

> I have not written again in this book since my return, because I have written to you instead, my own dear Love, answering the letters you have sent me by every steamer . . . (LA, 682)

It is also an introduction to Wharton's inference that the affair is over, for she continues: "But yesterday your letter of June 2^{d} came, & I learned from it that you will certainly not come here till the autumn, & that all our future is in doubt" (LA, 682). Wharton used her journal not to give a day-by-day account of her relationship with Fullerton, but to reflect on the most crucial moments. She allowed occasional large gaps to occur between entries, but she remained aware of the need for textual unity and therefore started every first entry after a period of silence with an explanation of what had happened in the meantime, thereby giving her reader, as it were, a guide for the interpretation of the gap in the text.

Apart from the textual gaps between the various journal entries, there are also gaps in the text itself, which invite the reader to fill them with meaning. I have argued the importance in Wharton's female adultery stories of her 'tact of omission' in representing the unspeakable and the secretive. In her journal, we see very similar examples of this. The entry of November 27th – "Your letter from Paris . . ." – thus sends different signals to the addressee and the external reader. It is important to be aware of the vastly different contextual knowledge of the external reader and the addressee. To Fullerton it says: "You know the letter that I mean." To the external reader, the message is much more suggestive and conspiratorial. "You can imagine what kind of letter it was," it seems to say. Similarly, the enigmatic entry on May 9th, which just reads "La Châtaignerie. Montmorency" (LA, 677), but where Wharton has pressed a flower onto the page, will have served for Fullerton as a reminder of a significant event. For the external reader, the entry forms an incentive for conjecture. Several critics have concluded that Wharton's highly romantic, but also rather adolescent non-verbal communication marks the date that Wharton and Fullerton consummated their relationship. In the absence of other historically reliable information on this issue, the reader may certainly be tempted to draw this conclusion.

It is interesting to compare this journal entry with a not dissimilar textual manipulation in "The Muse's Tragedy," which I discussed in the previous section. There is a parallel between the asterisks that the story's female protagonist, Mary Anerton, adds to the letters that the famous poet Vincent

[31] These entries are dated: 20 April, 25 April, 27 April, 3 May, 5 May, 9 May, 13 May, 16 May, 19 May, 21 May, 22 May, 24 May, 25 May, 31 May.

Rendle sent to her, suggesting the deliberate censuring of the letters through the deletion of intimate, or even erotic, passages, and the flower which Wharton stuck into her journal. I do not want to suggest that Wharton, like her fictional character, was consciously trying to mislead her readers and that nothing of significance occurred on that day in May to which Wharton refers. Rather, Wharton was aware that non-verbal communication could be more effective in suggesting the nature of her encounter with Fullerton to her external readers than a textual description. She appealed not only to the reader's imagination, but also to their willingness to identify with her and to their compassionate understanding for her feelings, which she needed to invoke to atone for her role in this transgressive relationship.

Alternating with the many passages in which Wharton talks directly to Fullerton, there are cinematographic descriptions of scenes in which she is the leading lady. The entry of April 27th describes a breakfast scene:

> A note comes almost every morning now. It is brought in on my breakfast-tray, with the other letters, & there is a delicious moment of postponement, when one leaves it unopened while one pours the tea, just in order to 'savourer' longer the joy that is coming! – Ah, now I see in all this the instinctive longing to pack every moment of my present with all the wasted, driven-in feeling of the past! One should be happy freely, carelessly, *extravagantly*! How I hoard & tremble over each incident & sign! I am like a hungry beggar who crumbles up the crust he has found in order to make it last longer! . . . And then comes the opening of the letter, the slipping of the little silver knife under the flap (which one should never tear!), the first glance to see how many pages there are, the second to see how it ends, & then the return to the beginning, the breathless first reading, the slow lingering again over each phrase & each word, the taking possession, the absorbing of them one by one, & finally the choosing of the one that will be carried in one's thoughts all day, making an exquisite accompaniment to the dull prose of life . . . (LA, 675)

This scene shows the effect Fullerton's letters had on her. He is, however, not addressed directly, and the 'you' that appears so frequently throughout the diary is not called in here. At the same time, the 'I' is occasionally substituted by the more impersonal 'one,' and the journal's dominant phraseological form, direct discourse, is replaced by a form which is more like indirect free discourse. Wharton moves from being a co-protagonist to being a witness-participant. The effect of this shift, even though it is a relatively minor one, is to emphasize Wharton's role of heterodiegetic rather than autodiegetic narrator, which effectively enlarges the distance between Wharton as narrator and as protagonist (Lanser, 159-160). Yet, she has created a scene, which, as she herself calls it, gives "the impression of vividness, of *presentness*, in the

affair narrated" (WF, 37; Wharton's italics). She not only invites Fullerton to witness her breakfast ritual, but extends the invitation to other readers.

The detailed descriptions of trips Wharton and Fullerton undertook, such as the one given in the entry dated May 3rd, have a similar effect.

> History & romance & natural loveliness every mile of the way – across the windings of Seine & Oise, through the grey old towns piled up above their rivers, through the melting spring landscape, all tender green & snowy fruit-blossoms, against black slopes of fir – till a last climb brought us out above the shimmering plain, with Beauvais choir rising 'like a white Albi' on its ledge . . .
>
> Then the lazy, happy luncheon in the warm court-yard of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, with dogs & children playing, canaries singing, flowers blooming about the little fountain – the coffee & cigarettes in the sunshine, & the slow stroll through the narrow streets first to St Etienne, then through the bright variegated fair which filled the Grande Place – till, guided by you, we reached the little lane behind the cathedral, & saw, far up against the blue, the soaring, wheeling choir – 'saw it turn', as you put it, 'cosmically spin through space . .' (LA, 675-676)

A passage like this strongly evokes the travel writer Wharton. In *A Motor-Flight Through France*, she also describes a trip to Beauvais, which she undertook just a few years earlier. She there describes approaching the town as follows: "[S]uddenly there soared before us the great mad broken dream of Beauvais choir – the cathedral without a nave – the Kubla Khan of architecture . . ." (MFF, 29). If the language in the journal seems rather flowery and exalted, a comparison with the passage in *A Motor-Flight Through France* shows that Wharton simply employed her travel writer's register. There are several other passages in which she reconstructs their meetings in the outdoors. "We met the other day at the Louvre, & walked to St. Germain l'Auxerrois. Then we took a motor, & went over to 'Les Arènes de Lutéce' & then to St Etienne du Mont . . . Then we walked to the Luxembourg, & sat for a long time in a quiet corner under the trees" (LA, 677). As part of an ongoing dialogue with Fullerton, they often seem rather detailed and oddly irrelevant. Their function does not so much lie in refreshing Fullerton's memory of their outing, but rather in creating a background and quite literally a scenery against which their affair took place, for the benefit of a reader other than the addressee.

Throughout her journal, Wharton employed imagery which we also regularly find in her fiction. The house imagery is introduced in the entry of February 21st, where she describes her despair at Fullerton's failure to write by comparing her soul to a closed-up house. The comparison of the woman's soul to a house is strongly reminiscent of the often quoted passage from "The

Fullness of Life,"[32] but the emotional connotation is now much harsher, much more desperate, as becomes clear from the poem "*Âme close*," which she wrote in the journal the next day. In contrast, travelling, and especially 'motoring,' is associated with freedom. She refers to "the 'motor nonsense' that always seizes me after one of these long flights through the air" (LA, 675). Wharton's first entry refers to a drive with Fullerton through the countryside around Lenox, where the Whartons had their home, on which occasion they found blooming witch-hazel, symbolizing the new phase that her life was about to enter.

Once Wharton and Fullerton had returned to France, their frequent moments together often took place during trips to the French countryside. These occasions invariably were associated with great happiness and she dreamt of escaping "for twenty-four hours to a little inn in the country, in the depths of a green wood" (LA, 676). There also appears to have been a practical reason for wanting to escape her house to meet Fullerton. On May 13th she notes that "[s]omething gave me the impression the other day that we were watched in this house . . . commented on. – Ah, how a great love needs to be a happy & open love! How degraded I feel by other people's degrading thoughts . . . " (LA, 677). Although she flung herself into the affair, seemingly without any emotional reserve, she remained very aware of the fact that it was a transgressive relationship, which needed to be kept a secret. Even though her marriage had already deteriorated and she and Teddy Wharton had become estranged, Wharton wanted to appear utterly respectable. The frequent trips to the countryside were therefore also attempts to escape the watchful eyes of her surroundings. On the liner back to America, she sums up the places they visited together: "Herblay . . . Montfort l'Amaury . . . Provins . . . Beauvais . . . Montmorency . . . Senlis . . . Meudon . . . What dear, sweet, crowding memories! What wealth for a heart that was empty this time last year" (LA, 682). The summing up of these places, like the renewed reference to the witch-hazel, effectively enhances the textual unity.

For Wharton, her journal was probably a document in which she wanted to preserve the essence of the emotions and desires that Fullerton had aroused. It seems that she wanted to share them with him, but also with an external audience, although not during her lifetime. She appeals to her audience for understanding, at the same time acknowledging that there is no future for this transgressive relationship. According to Price and McBride, "Wharton appears to have acted in transgressive and conforming ways at once, compensating for her deviation from the social form of marriage by conforming to an alternative standard plot of the female life. She was living/writing a

[32] The passage reads: "But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes." (CSS 1, 14)

conventional seduction plot" (Price & McBride, 668). Like many of the adulterous female protagonists in her short stories, she realizes that she cannot ultimately escape an unsatisfactory marriage. Her situation has become more poignant now that she has experienced unexpected happiness.

> I have stood it all these years, & hardly felt it, because I had created a world of my own, in which I lived without heeding what went on outside. But since I have known what it was to have some one enter into that world & live there with me, the mortal solitude I came back to has become terrible . . . (LA, 682)

The penultimate entry of May 31st actually provides the only direct reference to Wharton's marriage. During the train journey to her Lenox home with her husband, his lack of understanding for her spiritual needs becomes painfully clear again and she exclaims bitterly: "I heard the key turn in my prison-lock" (LA, 682). Her attempts to console herself with her past happiness only lead her to conclude: "I wrote of Senlis: – 'One such hour ought to irradiate a whole life.' – Eh bien, non – ce n'est pas assez!" [Well, no – it is not enough!] (LA, 683). Whereas in her short stories on female adultery, the marriage situation is described in great detail, providing the reader with ample explanation for the unhappy wife's adulterous desires, in the journal the Wharton marriage is only referred to at the end.

Wharton started the journal on 29 October 1907, as she became aware of a distinctive emotional rapport and perhaps already a sexual tension between Fullerton and herself. Since this was a new experience for Wharton, there was a clear incentive to start recording her experience of meeting the man who was to become her one great passion. Wharton's affair with Fullerton lasted some three years. As becomes clear from her letters to him, it came to an end in 1910, even though they continued to meet and correspond for many years afterwards (LEW, 218-221). Yet, she made her last entry into the journal on 12 June 1908, within a few weeks of her return to America, after their first months together in France. Although the affair with Fullerton continued after the Spring months of 1908, she uses the final entry to emphasize her realisation that it was coming to an end:

> I sent you back a desperate word: 'Don't write to me again! Let me face at once the fact *that it is over.* Without a date to look to, I can't bear to go on, & it will be easier to make the break now, voluntarily, than to see it slowly, agonizingly made by time & circumstance.' – (LA, 682-683; Wharton's italics)

She chose not to use the journal to record any of her further meetings with Fullerton or her feelings for him as their affair continued. We do not know why she abandoned the journal and we cannot be sure that it was a conscious literary decision, with a view to constructing a meaningful ending to this text.

To have the journal end where it does, however, at a point which does not correspond to the historical end of the affair, implies a deliberately chosen moment of narrative closure. The journal, like many of her female adultery stories, is characterized by what Leitch calls a "debunking rhythm" (Leitch, 132). The initial promise of a life which is not completely devoid of emotional and erotic rapport with a loved one is shattered, and Wharton presents herself as someone who is being forced back into an unhappy marriage. She makes it very clear that she finds it very difficult to see it as an experience which has enriched her life, despite the unhappy ending: "If you knew how I repeat to myself: 'I have had my hour, & I am grateful for it!' Yes – but the human heart is insatiable, & I didn't know, my own, I didn't know! – " (LA, 683). The journal thus ends with a profound sense that the affair has not only enriched her life, but has also made her painfully aware of a deficiency in her emotional life which she will have to continue to acknowledge.

In the journal, Wharton presented "the foreshortening of a dramatic climax connecting two or more lives" (WF, 56), which she herself qualified as short story material. I have suggested that she composed the text as a work of fiction, in which she employed rhetorical devices and narrative techniques that she also used in her female adultery short stories. Not intended for publication, it nevertheless may have served for Wharton as a way to make her affair public, if only posthumously, in a manner befitting a writer, by fictionalizing a highly important phase of her life. The text, as a result, attains a double function: that of a private document, addressed at a specific person with whom she wanted to share her thoughts and feelings, and that of a public apology for a transgressive love affair.

6.4. Conclusion

All too aware of the prudish literary climate of contemporary America, Edith Wharton developed narrative strategies of indirectness to enable her to address the topic of female adultery and negotiate her views on the role of women in society and marriage. Wharton's 'tact of omission,' which includes the avoidance of the depiction of the adulterous affair, the use of evasive and euphemistic language by her narrators and characters in talking about female adultery, the emphatic use of the word silence, and the frequent use of ellipsis, denotes society's refusal to openly discuss issues that form a potential threat to the accepted manners and morals. Wharton's reticence in dealing with the sexual aspect of the adulterous affair not only reveals her awareness of the restrictive code of the literary market, but also suggests that she wanted to emphasize, at least in her published fiction, that emotional and spiritual fulfilment were more important for women than sexual freedom.

Wharton's narrative strategies of indirectness also involved the writing of texts in which she explicitly dealt with female adultery. The "Beatrice Palmato

fragment" provides a unique example of the kind of short story that Wharton knew could never appear in print, but which she wanted to write all the same. It seems she wanted to prove to herself and, possibly, to posthumous readers of her work, that she was an even more versatile writer than could be inferred from her published work and that she could compete with the contemporary colleagues who dared to write more explicitly about sexuality than she did. Although she, if grudgingly, accepted that the literary market censured the work which she offered for publication or expected her to apply self-censorship, she privately indulged in writing a short story in which she defied all rules and which consequently succeeds in astounding even her modern readers.

Wharton's own adulterous affair remained a well-kept secret until long after her death. She gave an account of her affair in "The Life Apart," casting herself as the protagonist in a text which shares significant characteristics with her female adultery short stories. Her decision to write this document offers an interesting parallel with Wharton's authorship, which, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, she also, to some extent, saw as "her entertainingly guilty secret" (Lewis, 298), because it was regarded inappropriate in the social circles of 'old' New York to aspire to a professional career as a writer.

Wharton thus turned the need for discretion and indirectness in her writing about female adultery into a literary strategy. At a textual level, in the short stories which she intended for publication, she accepted the need for circumlocution in order to avoid being regarded too explicit and subversive. She turned this to her advantage by using it as a starting point for the use of rhetorical devices which played upon the idea that some things cannot be said out loud. At the same time, she circumvented the restrictions which applied to her 'official' fiction by writing about female adultery openly in texts which she wrote for her own pleasure and purpose, but which have survived as evidence of her feelings about her own illicit affair and her views on adultery and female sexuality.

Concluding Remarks

i. Contributing to a literary tradition

The origins of female adultery as literary motif have been traced back to the Middle Ages, when the stories about the illicit love between Tristan and Iseult and Lancelot and Guinevere formed the subject of many romances. However, the final decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century may be seen as the "High Age of Adultery" (White & Segal, 3), as a result of the appearance of a large and varied body of literature about adulterous wives. Since then, the subject seems to have lost little of its appeal. In her book *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal*, Annette Lawson recounts: "In 1984, the Booker Prize for literature went to Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*, a story of a woman trying to break away from her adulterous lover and failing to find true happiness in marriage. Three years later, one critic attending the Booker Prize dinner was heard to mutter, 'I want Chinue Achebe's book to win because it is the only damned book *not* about adultery.'"[1] The disgruntled critic essentially confirms that the adulterous affair brings together the irresistible combination of human emotions and circumstances which has inspired writers throughout the ages.

Kate Chopin's and Edith Wharton's fascination with adultery as a literary topic mirrors the turn-of-the-century authorial interest in the adultery of wives. The recurrent use of the female adultery motif in literature reflects a serious concern for social and moral issues related to the position of women in society, and more in particular, in marriage. The fictional representation of the adulterous wife in her social context provided writers with the possibility to present a variety of perspectives on contemporary society. Readers were invited to determine their own stand on issues related to the role of women in society in general and in marriage in particular. The female adultery motif was thus instrumental in the negotiation of views through literature on social and moral issues which formed an important part of the public debate, and thus in the transmission of contemporary culture.

In America, as in many European countries, the public debate on these issues became increasingly heated and polarized towards the close of the nineteenth century, when the 'New Woman,' both as literary subject and as author, began to demand a role and place in society. The printed media formed the main platform for this public debate, but in a market which saw the rapid

[1] Annette Lawson, *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 17.

increase of newspapers and magazines, publishers all competed for their share of the reading public and therefore appear to have wanted to avoid the potential confrontation with readers as a result of appearing to give a platform for radically subversive views. Major periodicals like the *North American Review* offered women writers the opportunity to give expression to their opinions on a variety of topics related to women and marriage. However, the views of these women coincided with or only marginally differed from the generally accepted views on these topics, which was probably a prerequisite for being given publishing space. Women writers who wanted to express controversial, groundbreaking opinions generally only had the chance of being published in newspapers and magazines which operated in the margins of the literary market.[2]

Literature offered women writers a different, perhaps even wider range of opportunities. The American women writers whom I discussed as precursors of Chopin and Wharton in terms of their use of female adultery in short fiction, Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott, did so in subgenres in which the introduction of this controversial topic was accepted, sometimes even anticipated. Fern could be overtly provocative, even mischievous, precisely because this was expected of her in her satirical columns. She alternatively wrote sentimental short stories, in which she celebrated the contemporary ideal of the 'True Woman,' but invited the reader's sympathy for women whose chaste reputation was unjustly questioned. Alcott could write about female adultery in her sensation stories, because it formed an almost standard ingredient in a subgenre of the short story which aimed at offering readers a form of escapism rather than a critical reflection on contemporary society.

Emerging from this American literary tradition, Chopin and Wharton repeatedly returned to the topic of female adultery in their work, despite the disapprobation of the American literary market of challenging topics. Literary censorship, exercised by publishers and distributors, but in the first place by authors themselves, controlled the publication and reading of literature in turn-of-the-century America. Based upon their experience with the publication of their work, Chopin and Wharton knew that they were continuously testing the limits of what was and was not deemed acceptable. The vigilant attitude of those who controlled the literary market obliged both writers to adopt various strategies involving choice of the short story as a genre, choice of certain subgenres within that genre, and a range of techniques concerning point of view. This enabled them to introduce the female adultery motif without overtly offending their readers and at the same time allowed their literary careers to evolve in a direction which accommodated their authorial ambitions.

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[2] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for instance, decided to start her own magazine, *The Forerunner*, in order to have a platform for the expression of her socialist reform theories, both in fictional and non-fictional contributions. She wrote, edited, and published this magazine from 1909 until 1916, which indicates that the conservative attitude of the mainstream periodicals lasted until well into the twentieth century. See: Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Forerunner*: A New Woman's Changing Perspective on American Immigration," *Feminist Forerunners: New Womanism and Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Ann Heilmann (London: Pandora, 2003) 44-45.

ii. The short story as a strategy

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton explains that the choice of genre should be determined by the nature of the subject and that some subjects are more suited to be dealt with in short stories, whereas others need the length of the novel. This suggests that Wharton only allowed artistic considerations to determine her choice for a particular genre. In fact, for both Wharton and Chopin, it appears to have been a combination of commercial and artistic considerations which influenced their choice of genre when they wanted to write about *risqué* topics such as female adultery. Both the sensitivity of the literary market with regard to fiction that dealt with controversial and subversive issues, and their professional and artistic judgement with regard to the influence of the genre on the chosen subject, seem to have determined whether they opted for the novel or the short story.

The short story, as I argued in chapter 2, was often used to introduce new and potentially subversive subjects onto the literary market, because short stories were likely to draw less attention than novels. The brevity of the form moreover offered the possibility to focus on particular aspects of a controversial topic, such as female adultery, without having to deal with the issue in its entire breadth. Wharton thought short stories especially suited to produce "[t]he effect of compactness and instantaneity" (WF, 34) and to represent "crucial instances."[3] The short story is the appropriate form, "[i]f the incident dealt with be one which a single retrospective flash sufficiently lights up" (WF, 34). Whereas the female adultery novel often strives for a panoramic representation of the motif, the short story may be said to have a momentary approach, inviting writers and their readers to focus on a limited period or a specific moment of the adulterous affair. This allowed writers to highlight certain aspects of the situation, while leaving others undiscussed. They could, for example, focus on the motivation of the transgressive wife and invite the reader's sympathy for her, while disregarding the consequences of the affair. In this way they slanted the representation of female adultery in favour of the adulteress. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, it is possible, as I have argued, to distinguish a limited number of most frequently occurring categories of female adultery short stories, each pivoting on an essential element of the adulterous affair: desire, transgression, retribution, jealousy, or liberation.

Both Chopin and Wharton wrote female adultery stories in virtually all of the categories which I have defined, although their work reveals significant differences in emphasis. The type of story which focuses on the jealous husband does not seem to have been favoured by either Chopin or Wharton, who both only wrote one story of this type, "Her Letters" and "The Line of Least Resistance" respectively. However, it would be wrong to conclude that both writers were not interested in the male perspective on the adulterous affair. Among Wharton's female adultery stories there are several that address

[3] She chapter 2, note 48.

the fates of the men involved, whether they are the husbands, as in "The Line of Least Resistance," the children, as in "His Father's Son," or the lover, as in "The Long Run." Wharton addressed the effects that society had on the lives of individuals, and in Wharton's world, men are sometimes as restricted by society as women. In Chopin's regionalist stories, the male perspective is guaranteed through the use of the male protagonist as focalizer. Although Chopin's work is generally associated with her depiction of women, a close study of the narrative perspective in her short stories, in fact, shows that she perhaps revealed as much about her male as about her female characters.

None of Chopin's or Wharton's female adultery stories belongs to the category which I have labelled 'liberation,' and which I have argued is closely linked with the 'New Woman' movement. Neither writer overtly associated herself with this movement, which started to exert its influence on society at the end of the nineteenth century, or the women writers who were seen as its representatives.[4] In her diary of 1894, Chopin wrote: "I cannot yet discover any serious significance in the present craze for the hysterical morbid and false pictures of life which certain English women have brought into vogue" (KCPP, 181). She was almost certainly referring to 'New Woman' writers such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, and Mona Caird.[5] What Chopin seems to have objected to is the fact that many of the 'New Woman' novels were strongly and overtly didactic in their expression of the feminist ideology. In one of the rare articles on her own writing, Chopin wrote: "Some wise man has promulgated an eleventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not preach,' which, interpreted, means, 'Thou shalt not instruct thy neighbor as to what he should do'" (CW, 703). Chopin tended not to voice her opinion in the form of a character's or the narrator's analysis of social issues involving the position of women. Rather, she portrayed women who assert their sexuality and secure their emotional independence.

In all of Chopin's female adultery stories sexual desire plays an important role, even when it is not always the dominant aspect. At a time when female sexuality was still a topic which was rarely discussed openly, Chopin's stories offered insights into the emotional and sexual motivation of women in their relationship with men which readers were unaccustomed to. Although in most stories, the sexual desire of the adulteress is not made explicit, the fact that it was referred to as a driving force was innovative. The sexual assertiveness of Chopin's female characters may be seen as a form of liberation, and Chopin's place in the 'New Woman' tradition in literature is, as a result, far from easy to determine. [6]

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[4] For Chopin's attitude towards the 'New Woman' movement, see: Toth 1991, 182 and Walker, 20. For Wharton's views on the subject, see: Lewis, 486 and Singley, 13.

[5] Gail Cunningham points out that "[t]he incidence of death or despair amongst fictional New Women is extraordinarily high." Gail Cunningham, "'He-Notes': Reconstructing Masculinity," *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, eds. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke, [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 95.

[6] Charlotte Rich points out a similarity, which would deserve more detailed analysis, between the work, and particularly their depiction of female sexuality, of Kate Chopin and that of a writer who is generally regarded as a 'New Woman' writer, the British George Egerton. Charlotte Rich,

Even though Wharton is certainly not associated with 'New Woman' literature, in some of her short stories her characters explicitly elaborate on issues regarding the social position of women. In the very early "Souls Belated," Lydia Tillotson explains her views on getting remarried to her lover Gannett, and she admits that she sounds as if she is giving him "a lecture on sociology" (SB, 110). There are more examples of this kind of ideological statements. In "The Long Run," Paulina arrives on her lover's doorstep, ready to elope with him, and when he is seen to hesitate, she refutes his arguments with an analysis of the situation that arises "when a man and a woman agree to defy the world together" (LR, 317). Here too, the character apologizes for the tone of her plea: "I'm not theorizing about Man and Woman" (LR, 317), she claims, but of course that is exactly what she is made to do. Wharton's narrator uses the female protagonist to present an ideological point of view on a topical situation, in order to make it explicit what the male protagonist is recoiling from. A contemporary critic remarked that the story had "more than a little of the gospel according to Ellen Key" (Tuttleton, 227). The ideological expressions serve to show that, whatever women might wish to see changed with regard to their social position, they are unlikely to see their dreams become reality in the America of Wharton's fiction.

Wharton's views on the 'New Woman' movement become more evident in her later stories, in which, as I have argued, the new American woman often becomes her protagonist and the object of her criticism. Wharton did not see a fundamental change in the attitude towards women in the supposedly liberal 1920s, when compared with the 'old' New York era. R.W.B. Lewis relates how Wharton, in the final years of her life, responded to a novel about the role and status of women in contemporary society by saying that "for her part 'women were made for pleasure and procreation'" (Lewis, 486). Lewis admits that "one cannot be entirely sure of the *tone* of a remark like that," but that it was almost certainly "an acknowledgement of a somewhat bitter fact of life" (Lewis, 486; Lewis's italics). Despite the fact that the new American woman sported the outward signs of a free and progressive life style, she was fundamentally as restrained by society as her female forebears.

The emphasis in Wharton's female adultery stories is on retribution. Although some of the stories focus on this aspect more explicitly than others, almost all of Wharton's adulteresses face some kind of punishment for their transgressive behaviour. The adulterous affair is not a way out of an unhappy marriage, but instead an occurrence that leaves the adulteress more deeply entrenched in the situation which she had wanted to escape.

Throughout her career, Wharton appears to have made the choice of the short story genre in relation to the female adultery motif more deliberately and strategically than Chopin. Wharton was reluctant to make the adulterous liaison of a female protagonist the central concern of a novel, because she knew this would endanger its publication in a leading magazine. The writing of

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"Reconsidering *The Awakening*: The Literary Sisterhood of Kate Chopin and George Egerton," *Southern Quarterly* (Spring 2003): 121-136.

a novel was too big an investment to run the risk of not securing, preferably in advance, the commitment of a publisher. This may have influenced her in favour of the short story genre when she wanted to tell a story about a controversial subject like female adultery, although the genre was no guarantee for acceptance by periodicals. Even in 1932, "Joy in the House" was turned down by a number of editors, on account of "the ugliness of its theme" (Lewis, 506). Under the professional guidance of editors with whom she built up long-standing professional relationships, especially Rutger B. Jewett at Appleton, she developed experience with a wide range of periodicals (Levine 60-64). Although she disliked "being a commodity in a prudish marketplace" (Levine, 60), she learnt to deal with the limitations with regard to potentially controversial topics.

Chopin appears to have been less aware of or less concerned with the sensitivities of the literary market with regard to controversial and subversive topics. Unlike Wharton, she did not have a permanent editor to counsel her and she discovered the workings of the literary market as she went along. At the beginning of her career, she favoured the short story genre because it brought her the commercial success which she did not have with her first two novels. She subsequently sought to widen her literary scope by offering her short stories to more progressive publishing firms which were receptive to stories in which she addressed sexuality as an important motive for women in the relationship with men. Chopin's decision to write a novel which pivoted on the adultery of a married woman was, as I have argued, both motivated by market concerns and by her ambition to outgrow her reputation as a minor, regionalist writer. However, it signals a lack of insight into the literary market. With the ill-advised publication of *The Awakening*, she damaged her reputation as a writer and made her short story work unattractive for publishers.

iii. Writing to be heard

In Wharton's short story "Autres Temps...," the female protagonist has an epiphanic moment in which she is suddenly able to see her existing situation from a different perspective: "And then, in a flash, she viewed the chaos from a new angle" (AT/CSS 2, 267). Metaphorically, I would suggest, this is what Chopin and Wharton are allowing and stimulating their readers to do in their female adultery stories. Both writers used their stories to show how "individuals come to terms with the governing patterns of culture" (Greenblatt, 229). Turn-of-the-century society was in a state of flux with regard to its thinking about the position of women. Chopin and Wharton contributed to the ongoing debate on related issues by writing fiction in which they applied a well-known literary motif which pivoted on the married woman and her moral and social obligations in this role. They wanted to question the cultural patterns which dictated the lives of people, and in particular of women, and they

employed a variety of point-of-view techniques to examine the moral and social beliefs and practices from different angles. Chopin and Wharton presented their readers with different perspectives on the existing social order and gave their readers the opportunity to look at it "from a new angle," thereby inviting their readers to see possible alternatives to the existing culture.

The question which I want to address, in conclusion, is whether Chopin's and Wharton's use of point of view betrays a gendered authorial voice, which influenced the contemporary acceptance of their short stories on a controversial topic like female adultery and affected the extent to which they were successful in putting across their views and in achieving their literary ambitions. I will do this with reference to Susan Lanser's book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, in which she elaborates on the argument which she postulates in her earlier book. As I explained in my introduction, Lanser proposes a "homologous relation between point of view in narrative and the writer's position *vis-à-vis* the literary act" (Lanser 1981, 263). The way in which an author narrates a story, employs narrative point of view, in other words, is indicative of the way in which s/he perceives his/her writing and authorial position. Lanser assumes that "regardless of any woman writer's ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it [. . .] is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence" (Lanser 1992, 7).[7] She defines discursive authority as "the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice" (Lanser 1992, 6). A woman writer who seeks publication of her fiction implicitly "wants it to be authoritative for her readers, even if authoritatively antiauthoritarian" (Lanser 1992, 7). I would suggest that this probably applies to male as well as female writers. However, it seems that the subordinate social position of women in a patriarchal society is also reflected in their authority as a writer. Women writers had, and possibly still have, greater difficulty in claiming discursive authority than their male colleagues.

Discursive authority is closely linked to what I, in my introduction, termed dismissive censorship. An example of dismissive censorship, I suggested, is the critical reception of Chopin's first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, which was praised for the 'charming' manner in which it portrayed life in Southern America, while ignoring the contentious note which Chopin struck in some of these stories. Dismissive censorship also occurs at the level of the writer's professional status, as exemplified by Wharton's relations' "tacit disapproval" (BG, 122) of her success as a writer. The degree to which an author succeeds in battling dismissive censorship may be said to determine his/her discursive authority. Acquiring discursive authority ultimately means that a writer is able to break through the censorious attitude of his/her readers and is able to disperse his/her views and be confident that they are understood: not just to

[7] I understand Lanser's argument to refer not only to the novel, but also to other genres.

write, but also to be heard. Writers who succeed in claiming discursive authority are more likely to find their readers receptive to their views than writers who do not. It would seem that both Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin were only partially successful in claiming discursive authority from their contemporary readers, as represented by their literary critics.

Based on her analysis of Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," and with reference to Chopin's public apology for *The Awakening*, in which Chopin hinted that the novel's female protagonist had taken things into her own hand, Lanser suggests that Chopin's writing was "carried out as if it just 'happened that way'" (Lanser 1981, 263). She argues:

> Like the narrator of the story, Chopin was a confident writer when her ideology did not hit the raw nerves of the culture text; was generally careful to convey potentially inflammatory ideas through the minds of her characters rather than in her own voice and to present them partly through metaphor; and tried to suggest that whatever her characters were doing was natural and inevitable, given the circumstances of their life and the make-up of their character. (Lanser 1981, 263)

Nowhere is the narrator's or author's ideology expressed explicitly; things just seem to happen in Chopin's fictional world. The analogy with her authorial strategy is unmistakable. As I argued in chapter 4, Chopin presented a public image of an intuitive and spontaneous writer, who dashed off stories in the midst of a busy household and who, apparently, had no specific strategy for the development of her career as an author. Biographical information on Chopin's efforts to establish her name and the records which she kept of the publication history of each of her works reveal that she was much more purposeful in becoming recognized as a widely known author of progressive literature than she appeared to be.

Kate Chopin did not achieve the wide-spread acclaim for her work from her contemporaries that she had hoped for. She deliberately tried to shake off the image of a regionalist woman writer who wrote occasional stories and sketches to amuse herself and earn some extra income to support her family, an authorial identity for women writers which could count on a degree of acceptance. The contemporary reviews of her work show, however, that she was largely unsuccessful in changing the original image she had established. Chopin failed in her ambition to win the appreciation of a wide audience for fiction which addressed topical and controversial issues in a style which was more modern than the general public was used to. She only received the discursive authority which she aimed for posthumously, from her late twentieth-century readers and critics, who could appreciate the expression of her views as surprisingly modern and progressive for the time.

By contrast, Wharton's attitude towards her writing, both in terms of her ideas about her narrative techniques and her literary career as a whole, was

radically different from Chopin's. Whereas Chopin claimed to do her writing surrounded by her family, Wharton wrote in private. She was a highly disciplined worker, who spent every morning in her bedroom working, not appearing in public until lunchtime. Despite the homely image of a lady sitting up in bed with a writing board on her knees (Lewis, 4; Lee, 670), her writing habits betray a highly professional attitude towards her literary pursuits.

All through her life, Wharton remained acutely aware of the fact that her professional career was frowned upon by her family and the 'old' New York society from which she stemmed. Her remarks in *A Backward Glance* about the response of "the immense tribe" (BG, 143) of her New York relations reveal both a sense of ironically amused detachment from their emotional and intellectual world and a deeply-felt hurt at their lack of appreciation for what she had achieved. Despite her commercial success and her artistic recognition, she perhaps never totally managed to dispel the fear of not being taken seriously as a writer. Wharton sought to acquire discursive authority as a fiction writer by emphasizing her rationalism, her detachment, and her intellectualism, exploiting her wide reading and her extensive knowledge of (architectural) art and of foreign, even exotic cultures.

Wharton's non-fiction played an important role in her authorial self-construction. However, as Lyn Bennett points out, for her contemporary critics her book on interior decoration, *The Decoration of Houses*, and on literary techniques, *The Writing of Fiction*, seem to have marginalized her as a writer, rather than boosted her place in the American canon.[8] Bennett persuasively argues that both books, although they were well-received, affirmed a view of Wharton and of her work "as the product of material culture" (Bennett, 21).[9] Critics, on that basis, "were able to exclude Wharton from the realm of literary professionalism and deny her place in the American canon" (Bennett, 21). In the case of *The Decoration of Houses*, critics commented unfavourably on its lack of originality, while *The Writing of Fiction* was attacked for Wharton's lack of objectivity and professionalism as a literary critic. Her authorial status was, as a result, restricted "either because she is regarded as an artistic decorator who is not a truly professional novelist, or, alternatively (and ironically) because she is regarded as a self-interested novelist who is, as a result, not a truly professional literary critic" (Bennett, 39-40). In other words, instead of strengthening her image of a literary artist, Wharton's strategy of creating the image of connoisseur, cosmopolitan, and intellectual, by writing non-fiction on a variety of subjects in which she could display her wide reading and knowledge, was perceived as a weakness, suggesting dilettantism, rather than professionalism.

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[8] Lyn Bennett, "Presence and Professionalism: The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton," *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, ed. Gary Totten (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007) 19-43.

[9] Gary Totten uses the term 'material culture' in the definition proposed by Jules David Prown: "the manifestations of culture through material productions." See: Gary Totten, ed., Introduction, *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007) 2-4.

The contemporary critics of Wharton's fiction commented on the beauty of her language, her elegant style, and her sense of humour, sometimes ironic, sometimes satiric, and came to recognize her style as polished, intelligent, humorous, but also distant, lacking in human warmth and positiveness. She was praised for her insightful portrayal of female characters, but she was at the same time criticized for the lack of overt sympathy and warmth of her depictions. Critics generally felt that her later work did not have the quality or impact of her early work, partly because she continued to work in the realist tradition and refused to import modernist developments such as the stream-of-consciousness technique (Tuttleton, ix-xxii).

The criticism of Wharton's work was often significantly gendered. Critics remarked on her detachment, described by one contemporary critic as

> selfless and aloofly cool: as unsentimental as one fancies a scientist should be; and just as precise of vision. [. . .] Hers is the coolness of a vantage point well above the battle.[10]

The "mathematical accuracy"[11] with which she dissected the fictional societies which she created, her evident intellectualism, and the astringency of her mood were appreciated as signs of a certain 'masculinity' in her writing, distinguishing her from the majority of American woman novelists who had been active until then. At the same time, critics applauded her "delicacy of touch"[12] and her attention for detail. In the heyday of her career, then, Wharton was generally seen as a woman who 'wrote like a man,' an image which she herself was only too eager to support. In a letter to Robert Grant, she wrote in 1907:

> The fact is that I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is. – I conceive of my subjects like a man – that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women – & then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in. (LEW, 124)

Significantly, Wharton felt it was undesirable for her work to be seen as all too feminine. It underlines her ambition to be seen as a major writer, valued in terms of artistic achievement and recognition, rather than commercial success. This, in Wharton's view, was almost synomymous with being recognized as a male writer. For in her own experience, a woman writer was in danger of not

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[10] Florence Haxton Britten, "The Perfection of Technique: Edith Wharton's New Stories Reveal Her Old Mastery in Studies of Personal Relations," *New York Herald Tribune Books* 9 (26 March 1933): 6; reprinted in Tuttleton, 503-504.

[11] "Literature," *Independent* (6 June 1901): 1322-1323; reprinted in Tuttleton, 43.

[12] "Review of *The Greater Inclination*," *Academy* 57 (8 July 1899): 40; reprinted in Tuttleton, 21-22.

being valued for her artistic achievements, even if she could boast commercial success.

Despite the criticism which her work engendered, Wharton succeeded in becoming recognized by her contemporaries as a writer of considerable importance. Several critics acknowledged Wharton's predilection for the "drama of love that is not coincident with marriage."[13] The fact that some of her stories explicitly feature an adulterous liaison does not seem to have unduly troubled her critics. By and large, they recognized the relevance of Wharton's underlying themes. She may therefore be said to have succeeded in putting across her views concerning the position of women in society. At the same time, she continued to be regarded as a member of a small social class, populating a narrow stratum of American society. Her work was therefore often regarded as "too specialized to be the epic of America."[14] Even though her work sold well, and we must assume, was read by many, the views which she expressed were possibly not appreciated as relevant for a wide audience. Her privileged background, in combination with her cosmopolitan life-style, may therefore be said to have had a negative effect on her discursive authority as a writer for a wide audience.

Judging by their recurring choice of the female adultery motif and the way in which they employed it in order to negotiate their views on the position of women in contemporary society, Chopin and Wharton appear to have been aware of the influence they could exert with their work on the way contemporary culture was perceived by their readers. Their ambitions to be recognized as literary artists and to align themselves with major, predominantly male, European writers influenced the development of their work, with regard to genre and technique, as well as the choice of subject and theme, and determined the way they operated in the literary market. However, it seems that they did not succeed in acquiring the discursive authority required to make the most of the negotiating potential of their fiction. Would Chopin's work have had a greater impact on her contemporary readers if she had continued to write in the regionalist genre, exploiting more purposefully the opportunity to address subversive topics because her readers would be less likely to take offence if these were associated with a world which appeared far removed from their own? Would Wharton have reached a broader readership if she had been less obviously a representative of a privileged social class and if her work had not focused almost exclusively on a relatively narrow stratum of society? We can only speculate about this. However, it seems that the efficacy of Chopin's and Wharton's work in terms of the negotiation of world views was not only determined by the protective narrative techniques which they sought to employ in a censorious literary climate, but also conditioned by the ways in which they sought to establish themselves as women writers in turn-of-the-century America.

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[13] Francis Hacket, "Mrs. Wharton's Art," *New Republic* 10 (10 February 1917): 50-52; reprinted in Tuttleton, 235-237.

[14] Charles K. Trueblood, "Edith Wharton," *The Dial* 68 (January 1920): 90, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, 13 April 2008 <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>.

Epilogue

The title of this thesis was inspired by that of David Lean's film *Brief Encounter*, which is about the adulterous affair of a middle-class, suburban housewife and a doctor, who are both married, but, it goes without saying, not to each other. The film's title is significant in its wording. The word 'encounter' is more euphemistic than the word 'affair,' which is the more usual in this respect. David Lean's choice characterizes the conservative climate of post-World War II Britain, in which the film was made and viewed. In relation to the subject of my study, the word 'brief' takes on a special meaning. Brief, after all, means not only short, but, used as a noun, refers to a short piece of prose writing.

Brief Encounter is a 1945 screen adaptation of Noël Coward's one-act play *Still Life*. In the film, the lovers, played by Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard, first meet in the refreshment room of the fictional Milford Junction and, for a while, continue to meet furtively every week, until their affair comes to an end when the doctor goes out to work in Africa. The film's main setting, a railway station, recalls crucial scenes in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: that of Anna's first meeting with Vronsky and that of her suicide at the end of the novel. The cat-and-mouse play of the buffet lady and the station attendant provides a comic, lower-class backdrop to the middle-class affair and has a function similar to the Levin-Kitty story line in Tolstoy's novel. And the soundtrack, featuring Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, provides a musical link to the Russian setting of *Anna Karenina*.

Brief Encounter is told from the perspective of the woman, which links the film to the tradition of female adultery in literature; it is her adultery, rather than his, which is the heart of the matter. The sexual aspect of the relationship is dealt with obliquely – so obliquely in fact, that it is unclear whether the affair is consummated or not. The emphasis is very much on the overwrought expression of the lovers' feelings of self-reproach and shame, as they try to escape their suffocating worlds. As such, the film is evidence of the fact that in the 1940s the attitude towards sexuality in art was, or had once more become, as conservative as in the decades around the turn of the century. Modern film audiences have not always appreciated this, as becomes clear from the comment of one reviewer in the 1970s, who defined the message of *Brief Encounter* as "Make tea, not love."[1] At the same time, its reticence with regard to all matters sexual has probably helped to give the film its present-day cult

[1] Adrian Turner, "Brief Encounter," *The Criterion Collection*, 22 March 2008 <www.criterion.com/asp/release.asp?id=76&eid=95&section=essay>.

status, for it acts as a reminder of manners and morals which are no longer as strict as they were in the 1940s, but which have perhaps not altogether lost their appeal. Although both the film and the play on which it is based lack the complexity of the nineteenth-century female adultery novel, they are examples of the way in which the tradition of the literary motif was carried on in modern literature, and it will, no doubt, continue to inspire artists of various disciplines and to generate countless works of art. For, as Denis de Rougemont pointed out: "Sans l'adultère, que seraient toutes nos littératures?" [What would our literature be without adultery?].[2]

I started this thesis project with a fascination for the novel of female adultery; my ensuing research has opened up to me, and I hope to my readers, a far less well-known corpus of short stories with this literary motif. Chopin's and Wharton's female adultery stories were instrumental in introducing into American literature a topic which had, until then, remained virtually unused, and their contribution to female adultery literature can therefore not be overestimated. With these short stories they acquired a place alongside the European turn-of-the-century writers who made significant contributions to female adultery literature, capturing essential aspects of the adulterous relationships of wives in narrative, thus creating a rich diversity of brief affairs on brief affairs.

[2] See Introduction, note 1.

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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Overspel, en dan vooral in de vorm van de buitenechtelijke affaire van de getrouwde vrouw, is een onderwerp dat veelvuldig voorkomt in het werk van Europese, en in het bijzonder Franse, schrijvers uit de tweede helft van de negentiende en de eerste decennia van de twintigste eeuw. Geïnspireerd door het werk van hun tijdgenoten maakten twee Amerikaanse schrijfsters, Kate Chopin en Edith Wharton, in hun literaire werk geregeld gebruik van dit onderwerp. Zij leverden hiermee een kritische bijdrage aan het publieke debat over actuele, sociaal relevante onderwerpen met betrekking tot de maatschappelijke positie van de vrouw en distantieerden zich van de heersende Amerikaanse traditie van literatuur van en voor vrouwen. De centrale onderzoeksvragen die ik mij heb gesteld zijn de volgende: Wat zegt de voorkeur van deze schrijfsters voor dit onderwerp en de wijze waarop zij het gebruikten over hun ideeën met betrekking tot de rol van de vrouw in de maatschappij en over hun ambities om een bijdrage te leveren aan de maatschappelijke discussie over dit onderwerp? Hoe slaagden zij erin hun korte verhalen over overspelige vrouwen zo vorm te geven dat deze geschikt werden geacht voor publicatie, terwijl literatuur die de algemeen geaccepteerde normen en waarden bekritiseerde in het Amerika van die tijd aan strenge censuur onderhevig was? Welke relatie kan worden gelegd tussen hun gebruik van het onderwerp en de wijze waarop zij zich wilden positioneren in het contemporaine literaire veld?

In deel I van dit proefschrift schets ik de sociale en literair-historische context waarbinnen het werk van Kate Chopin en Edith Wharton geplaatst dient te worden. In deel II staan Chopins en Whartons verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel centraal.

Deel I

In het eerste hoofdstuk van deel I bespreek ik het gebruik van vrouwelijk overspel in romans uit de tweede helft van de negentiende en het begin van de twintigste eeuw. Het motief was in deze periode waarschijnlijk zo populair omdat het zich uitstekend leende om actuele, sociaal relevante onderwerpen met betrekking tot de maatschappelijke positie van de vrouw aan de orde te stellen. In de Continentaal Europese literatuur zijn diverse voorbeelden te vinden van romans waarin de overspelige relatie van een getrouwde vrouw centraal staat. Enkele daarvan, zoals *Madame Bovary* van Gustave Flaubert en

Anna Karenina van Leo Tolstoy, behoren inmiddels tot de canon van de wereldliteratuur. In de Britse en Amerikaanse literatuur werd veel omzichtiger met het onderwerp omgegaan, mogelijk omdat de censuur op literaire publicaties in deze landen doorgaans strenger was dan in de landen op het Europese continent. In Groot-Brittannië en Amerika werden strikte, hoewel ongeschreven, richtlijnen gehanteerd met betrekking tot wat wel en niet toelaatbaar was in literaire publicaties. Britse en Amerikaanse schrijvers werden geacht zelf-censuur toe te passen en controversiële onderwerpen te vermijden, teneinde niet het risico te lopen dat hun werk ongepubliceerd bleef.

Veel minder bekend dan de romans over vrouwelijk overspel zijn de vele korte verhalen over dit onderwerp. Deze verhalen staan centraal in hoofdstuk 2. We vinden voorbeelden in het werk van diverse Europese schrijvers en schrijfsters. Mijn analyse van deze korte verhalen toont aan dat er een zekere mate van uniformiteit is in de wijze waarop het onderwerp in dit genre wordt behandeld. Terwijl de romans de overspelige relatie van de getrouwde vrouw in de volle breedte behandelen, spitsen de verhalen zich meestal toe op een bepaald aspect van het overspel: het verlangen als motivatie voor het overspel (*desire*), de gang van zaken rond het overspel (*transgression*), de bestraffing van het overspel (*retribution*), de jaloezie van de bedrogen echtgenoot (*jealousy*), en het overspel als bevrijding uit de heersende maatschappelijke verhoudingen (*liberation*).

In hoofdstuk 3 richt ik mij op de Amerikaanse historische context waarbinnen Chopin en Wharton werkten, door te schetsen hoe hun voorgangsters over vrouwelijk overspel schreven. Ik laat zien dat Amerikaanse vrouwen in kranten- en tijdschriftenartikelen een belangrijke bijdrage leverden aan het publieke debat over de rol van de vrouw in de maatschappij en in het huwelijk. In deze artikelen werd vooral getracht het ideaalbeeld van de *'True Woman'* te versterken. In de fictie van Amerikaanse schrijfsters was het onderwerp vrouwelijk overspel slechts toelaatbaar in bepaalde genres. Als voorbeelden, bespreek ik werk van Fanny Fern en Lousia May Alcott. Fern gebruikte haar columns om op satirische wijze het moderne Amerikaanse huwelijk en de verhouding tussen de seksen te becommentariëren. Alcott, die vooral bekendheid verwierf met haar verhalen en romans voor adolescenten, schreef daarnaast verhalen in het genre *sensation fiction.*

Deel II

In deel twee staan de korte verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel van Kate Chopin en Edith Wharton centraal. Hoewel zij zich er terdege van bewust waren dat verhalen over overspelige vrouwen meestal niet geaccepteerd werden door de Amerikaanse kranten en tijdschriften die hun afzetmarkt vormden, maakten beide schrijfsters geregeld gebruik van dit literaire motief. Zij wilden hiermee niet alleen hun artistieke verwantschap met hun Europese tijdgenoten benadrukken, maar ook een kritische bijdrage leveren aan het publieke debat

over de rol van vrouwen in de maatschappij, daarmee aansluitend op contemporaine ontwikkelingen, zoals verpersoonlijkt in de '*New Woman.*'

Om hun fictie over vrouwelijk overspel acceptabel te maken voor hun uitgevers, pasten Chopin en Wharton een aantal narratieve strategieën toe. Zo kozen zij ervoor om dit onderwerp vooral in hun korte verhalen centraal te stellen en niet in hun romans, omdat het genre van het korte verhaal belangrijke voordelen bood ten opzichte van de roman voor de introductie van controversiële onderwerpen. Verder maakten Chopin en Wharton soms bewust gebruik van de eigenschappen van bepaalde subgenres binnen het korte verhaal; zo schreef Chopin verhalen in het subgenre van de *regionalist* literatuur en bediende Wharton zich geregeld van het subgenre van de *ghost story*. Daarnaast pasten Chopin en Wharton technieken toe met betrekking tot het vertellersperspectief, waardoor de beeldvorming van de overspelige vrouw werd beïnvloed. Voor mijn analyse van dit aspect van Chopins en Whartons verhalen maak ik gebruik van de methodologie van Susan Sniader Lanser, zoals uiteengezet in haar boek *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. Mijn analyse spitst zich toe op Chopins en Whartons gebruik van de verteller (*narrator*) en de focalisator (*focalizer*). Ik laat zien wat de opstelling van de vertellers met betrekking tot de overspelige vrouw onthult over Chopins en Whartons ideologische standpunten.

In hoofdstuk 4 bespreek ik de korte verhalen van Kate Chopin. Zij verwierf aan het begin van haar carrière vooral bekendheid als schrijfster van korte verhalen in het subgenre van de *regionalist* literatuur. Dit type verhalen bood haar de mogelijkheid om afwijkend gedrag te presenteren als onderdeel van een subcultuur en een samenleving die ver afstond van die van Chopins gemiddelde lezers. Zij kon daardoor een kritische houding aannemen ten opzichte van de heersende normen en waarden, zonder haar lezers de indruk te geven dat zij zelf werden bekritiseerd. Het subversieve karakter van deze verhalen werd echter nauwelijks onderkend. Mogelijk was dit het gevolg van, wat ik noem, *dismissive censorship*. Hiermee bedoel ik het negeren van het werk van een schrijver of van datgene wat deze daarmee wil uitdragen, zodat het gezagsondermijnende effect ervan verloren gaat.

Chopin wilde zich ontworstelen aan haar imago van *regionalist* schrijver. Geïnspireerd door haar literaire voorbeeld, Guy de Maupassant, begon zij steeds vrijmoediger te schrijven over vrouwelijke seksualiteit als drijvende kracht achter de partnerkeuze van vrouwen en zocht zij aansluiting bij avant-garde uitgevers. Haar gebruik van religieuze metaforen in relatie tot vrouwelijke seksualiteit onderstreept het subversieve karakter van haar werk.

Hoewel zij geen succes had geboekt met haar eerste twee romans, probeerde Chopin haar carrière als schrijfster uit te bouwen door opnieuw een roman te schrijven: *The Awakening.* De roman onderstreept de behoefte van vrouwen om zich maatschappelijk en emotioneel te kunnen ontplooien en kan worden gezien als Chopins antwoord op de Europese roman over vrouwelijk overspel. Het boek veroorzaakte een schandaal en gaf een negatieve wending

aan Chopins carrière. Door haar relatief vroegtijdige dood, kreeg zij niet meer de gelegenheid deze tegenslag te boven te komen.

In de hoofdstukken 5 en 6 behandel ik Edith Whartons korte verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel. Wharton gebruikte het vrouwelijk overspel motief vooral om het conflict te laten zien tussen iemands persoonlijke ambities en verlangens en de maatschappelijke verwachtingen waaraan moet worden voldaan. Dit weerspiegelde in belangrijke mate haar eigen ervaringen. Wharton was zich haar gehele leven pijnlijk bewust van het feit dat, in de sociale kringen waaruit zij afkomstig was, het ongepast werd gevonden wanneer een vrouw een literaire carrière nastreefde. Zij had geen hoge verwachtingen van de contemporaine ontwikkelingen met betrekking tot de positie van de vrouw. In Whartons fictie is het nagenoeg ondenkbaar dat het individu zich los kan maken van de morele en sociale beperkingen die door de maatschappij worden opgelegd.

In hoofdstuk 5, bespreek ik een aantal van Whartons narratieve technieken, te weten haar gebruik van vertellersperspectief, de wijze waarop zij haar verhalen begint en beëindigt, en haar karakteristieke gebruik van beeldspraak. Ik zet haar eigen gebruik van deze technieken af tegen datgene wat zij daarover zegt in haar boek *The Writing of Fiction*.

Wharton maakt in haar verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel gebruik van verschillende vormen van vertellersperspectief. In een aantal verhalen die tot het genre van de *ghost story* kunnen worden gerekend, introduceert Wharton een mannelijke ik-verteller (*first-person narrator*). De inzet van een bevooroordeelde, soms onbetrouwbare, ik-verteller speelt in deze verhalen een cruciale rol in het creëren van speciale band tussen de lezer en de schrijver. In de meeste verhalen gebruikt Wharton echter een hij-verteller (*third-person narrator*), waarbij soms de overspelige vrouw, maar soms ook een van de mannelijke personages als focalisator wordt gebruikt. In een aantal korte verhalen past zij een opmerkelijke verschuiving van het vertellersperspectief toe. De lezer krijgt hierdoor de gelegenheid de overspelige vrouw vanuit verschillende gezichtspunten te beschouwen. In haar latere korte verhalen laat Whartons verteller de lezer steeds meer toe in de gedachtenwereld van de vrouwelijke hoofdpersoon. Tegelijkertijd uit Wharton, via haar verteller, kritiek op deze overspelige vrouwen, die als voorbeelden van de Amerikaanse versie van de '*New Woman*' kunnen worden gezien.

Wharton had niet alleen uitgesproken ideeën over het gebruik van vertellersperspectief, maar ook over het begin en het einde van een verhaal. In haar korte verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel realiseert de hoofdpersoon zich aan het eind dikwijls dat de oorspronkelijke verwachtingen met betrekking tot zijn/haar toekomst niet zullen uitkomen en dat hij/zij niet zal kunnen ontsnappen aan het sociale keurslijf.

Om de verbeelding van haar personages en van de overspelige situatie te versterken, maakte Wharton in haar verhalen veelvuldig gebruik van beeldspraak. Daarvoor greep zij terug op haar uitgebreide kennis van en belangstelling voor, enerzijds, (binnenhuis)architectuur, en anderzijds, reizen.

Huizen en hun interieurs worden gebruikt als metaforen voor de maatschappelijke beperkingen waar Whartons personages tegenaan lopen. Reizen en vervoersmiddelen verbeelden de wens om zich te bevrijden van deze beperkingen.

In hoofdstuk 6 behandel ik Whartons *strategies of indirectness* met betrekking tot het vrouwelijk overspel in haar werk. Ik gebruik dit als een overkoepelende term voor de wijze waarop Wharton het onderwerp vrouwelijk overspel in haar werk behandelde, zonder expliciet subversief te zijn en/of het risico te lopen dat haar werk aan censuur ten prooi viel. Ontwijkend en eufemistisch taalgebruik, het nadrukkelijke gebruik van het woord *silence*, en het veelvuldige gebruik van ellipsis vormen onderdeel van Whartons *tact of omission.* Hiermee wordt onderstreept dat het gebruikelijk was om over vrouwelijk overspel te zwijgen en het onderdeel te laten worden van een *conspiracy of silence*.

Ik bespreek ook twee teksten waarin Wharton de stilte rond het vrouwelijk overspel verbrak: het zogenaamde "Beatrice Palmato fragment" en het dagboek dat Wharton schreef ten tijde van haar eigen buitenechtelijke relatie met Morton Fullerton. Zij schreef deze teksten niet met het oog op publicatie, in elk geval niet tijdens haar leven. Het "Beatrice Palmato fragment" kan worden beschouwd als een op zichzelf staand, erotisch verhaal over de seksuele relatie tussen een pas getrouwde jonge vrouw en een oudere man, die bovendien haar vader is. Mijn lezing van deze tekst legt niet de nadruk op het incestueuze aspect van deze relatie, maar onderstreept vooral het feit dat hier een vrouw wordt beschreven die seksuele bevrediging vindt in een buitenechtelijke relatie. Whartons dagboek, dat zij de titel "The Life Apart. (L'âme close)" gaf, is een persoonlijk document dat veel narratieve overeenkomsten vertoont met haar korte verhalen over vrouwelijk overspel. Voor Wharton bood het dagboek postuum de gelegenheid om haar zorgvuldig geheim gehouden buitenechtelijke relatie publiek te maken.

Door de strategische keuze voor het genre van het korte verhaal, voor bepaalde subgenres van het korte verhaal en door het effectief gebruik van het vertellersperspectief, konden Chopin en Wharton het vrouwelijk overspel motief geregeld in hun verhalen gebruiken en daarmee de rol van vrouwen binnen het huwelijk en de maatschappij aan de orde te stellen. Mijn conclusie, op basis van mijn analyse van deze verhalen en van de wijze waarop beide schrijfsters zich opstelden ten opzichte van het literaire veld, is dat zij er slechts gedeeltelijk in zijn geslaagd hun literaire ambities te realiseren en om, wat Lanser noemt, *discursive authority* te verwerven en een belangrijke bijdrage te leveren aan de maatschappelijke discussie in het Amerika van hun tijd.

Chopins werk wordt, sinds het werd herontdekt in de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw, zeer gewaardeerd om de baanbrekende wijze waarop zij de positie van de vrouw in de maatschappij aan de orde stelt. Voor haar tijdgenoten lijkt Chopins werk echter een minder significante rol te hebben

gespeeld in de maatschappelijke discussie over dit onderwerp. Hoewel Whartons werk door haar tijdgenoten gewaardeerd werd, was ze slechts gedeeltelijk succesvol in het overdragen van haar inzichten en standpunten ten aanzien van de maatschappelijke positie van de vrouw. Zij werd sterk geassocieerd met haar geprivilegieerde achtergrond en haar romans en verhalen spelen zich voornamelijk af in de gegoede kringen van het 'oude' New York. Het wereldbeeld dat zij in haar werk creëerde was daardoor mogelijk zo beperkt dat het grote publiek zich onvoldoende met haar personages en de door haar geschilderde problematiek kon identificeren.